

Enough of This Slow Life!
I WAS REINCARNATED AS A
HIGH ELF
AND NOW I'M
BORED

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Chapter 1 — The Damned Elf and the Damned Dwarf

Lying down on a large branch in a great tree, I took a bite of fruit. The satisfying crunch brought a light mixture of sweet and sour flavors to my mouth. This fruit, known as an apua, was said to be a key ingredient in a miraculous medicine that could reverse aging. It boasted an impressive price tag, but in this forest you could eat as many as you could stomach.

“Spirits of the wind,” I murmured, tossing the leftover core. A moment later, a sudden whirlwind crushed it into paste. As the fruit’s flesh became nourishment for me, so did its core become nourishment for the earth. And with a bit of luck, spitting its seeds back to the ground would result in a new tree.

As I yawned, a bird fluttered down from the sky to land on my chest, happily chirping away. I stretched a finger out toward it, and it snuggled up to my hand like a spoiled pet. It knew full well that I would never hurt it. It knew I was a member of a people that lived in harmony with the forest: an elf.

To be specific, I was a high elf, a type more in tune with the spirits. But as far as the forest-dwelling peoples went, there wasn’t much of a difference between us. Both elves and high elves rarely changed. They were largely immutable.

“Yeah. Honestly, I’m tired of this,” I muttered to myself as I lazed away alone in the woods.

If I ever grew hungry, there was always fruit around. I could refine my skill with a bow, though there was no need to hunt. And I could speak with the spirits to peek into the underlying truths of the world. For those desiring slow, peaceful days, the lifestyle of an elf was more than they could ever wish for...but after 120 years of it, I had had my fill. Technically speaking, I was probably closer to 150 years old, but I wasn’t really self-aware until about 30 years old, so I could only start counting from then.

Of course, other elves and high elves had no complaints about their way of life. They were fully satisfied to live alongside their beloved forest. After all,

they had never experienced anything different. The idea that another way of life was possible hadn't even crossed their minds. However, though I was born in the Forest Depths and had never once left its bounds, from the moment I was self-aware, I had known of another life.

Yes, I had been reincarnated. I still had my memories of my previous life in a different world. There, I was human and elves existed only in fantasy. My world, Earth, had been plagued with brutal and gruesome wars, but it had also been overflowing with entertainment, art, and culture. Knowing of a world of conflict, one that demanded each individual carve their own way, I fully appreciated the magnificence of the gentle, peaceful lives these elves led. But at the same time, coming from a world of such rich culture, I could only bear the lack of stimulation in elven society for so long. First and foremost...

"I wish I could eat meat..."

I was sick of living off of fruit. In response to my muttered complaint, the bird sitting on my chest took off in a panicked flight.

Huh, what a smart bird.

But I had never had any intention of catching it and eating it. If I lit a fire in the Forest Depths, I'd be drowning in complaints in no time. If I wanted to eat meat, I'd have to cook it, meaning I'd have to leave the forest. To put it another way, if I left the forest behind I'd be able to cook and eat meat, and then I'd be able to travel around and live a much more stimulating life.

"All right, I am done living as an elf. I simply am not...nah, I'm just not really cut out for it."

I had made an honest effort to assimilate into high elf society, living exactly as they did for over a hundred years, but I was at my limit. High elves were ageless and could live for over a millennium. When their bodies finally did perish, their souls would live on as spirits in nature, drifting about the natural world until the end of time. The thought of living like this for another 850 years, or even until the end of the world itself, wasn't all that appealing.

If I was going to live that long, wouldn't it be better to see the world, to experience all the foods and sights it had to offer? Once I'd had my fill of the world, maybe then I'd be interested in becoming a spirit or whatever.

I headed to a river running through the forest, then picked up some rocks and began striking them against each other, breaking chunks off until I had formed a stone knife. There were no processed metals in the forest. While there were certainly ores in the earth, it was generally understood that processed metals were a source of fear for the trees. It was no wonder the elves held animosity toward the dwarves, a race that excelled at the art of blacksmithing. I could understand the trees fearing tools like axes that were capable of cutting them down, but it didn't seem to make much sense when it came to things like spoons, forks, and other cutlery.

If one needed a blade in the forest, their only options were to carve one out of stone or fashion one from the teeth or bones of a large animal. However, even without being crafted into tools, the bones and teeth of large animals were prized valuables in elven society, so only the older elves were permitted to own them. Otherwise, the younger elves ran the risk of being consumed with avarice and bringing unnecessary death to the animals of the forest.

Yes, a greedy young elf like me would never be permitted to own such a thing, but at this point I didn't care much anymore. Once I left the forest behind, I would be leaving those customs behind me as well.

Looking at my reflection in the water, I used my new stone knife to slice away my hair. Long hair was a symbol of the noble high elves, so cutting it short was forbidden. But honestly, I had always felt like it was in the way. Of course, if I messed up with this improvised knife and cut it too short, there would be no going back. So for the time being, I left it at shoulder length.

If someone saw me like this, the high elf elders would lecture me for three days straight. And it would be decades before the scolding stopped. Naturally I had no desire to deal with that, so I decided to leave the forest behind immediately.

All I had done was cut my hair, but already I was starting to feel like my heart had become lighter as well.

There was no one I felt the need to say goodbye to before I left. Though I technically had parents, high elf children were raised by the entire settlement. Our connection by blood didn't make me feel any closer to them than to

anyone else in the village. It wasn't like I had no friends in the forest, but I didn't expect any of them to understand my desire to leave.

Oh well. There's nothing I can do about that.

This didn't have to be goodbye forever. If fate allowed it, we'd be able to meet again. They probably wouldn't even notice my absence for at least a month.

With that excuse, I began marching to the edge of the forest, my only possessions being my bow and arrows, a bag of woven ivy filled with apuas, and this stone knife.



The forest where the elves and high elves lived was called the Great Pulha Woodlands in the outside world. Though to be precise, the elves only inhabited a small part deep inside it, which they called the Forest Depths.

The high elves lived in the center of the Woodlands, surrounded by the other elven settlements. With the power of the spirits, the elves had cast a barrier around the Forest Depths, keeping out monsters and other races. In other words, taking a single step outside of the barrier meant you were already in the outside world. That said...

"I didn't think I'd be attacked by monsters the moment I stepped through. The outside world is a lot more stimulating than I thought..."

To my disbelief, the moment I left the barrier, I found myself surrounded by large canine monsters known as forest wolves. Was this stretch of the forest that dangerous, or was I just that unlucky? But even though I was outside the barrier, I was still deep in the forest. A single plaintive glance to the trees surrounding me was enough to earn their help. They immediately lifted their roots to keep the wolves at bay as I retreated into the treetops.

I'm safe for now, but I'll have to deal with those wolves somehow.

As the wolves growled at me from the forest floor, I had to decide whether I'd kill them or not. Felling forest wolves wasn't a particularly difficult task. I could take them down just by firing arrows from the safety of the trees. That said, the arrows I possessed were only sharpened wood, and so they might not be able

to penetrate thick fur and hide. I would have to aim for their eyes. Luckily, the only form of entertainment in a high elf settlement was to practice hitting difficult targets with a bow, and I had done little else in my hundred-some-odd years there. A small or moving target wasn't all that much of a challenge.

No, my concern was not whether I *could* kill the wolves but rather whether I *should*. Maybe there was no need to hesitate since they had attacked me first, but the idea of eating wolf wasn't all that appetizing, and skinning them here seemed like more trouble than it was worth. And of course, carrying one of their enormous bodies with me was out of the question. I could take their teeth or claws, but with so many wolves, it would be more than I could carry. There might have been value in killing a couple of them, but any more than that would be senseless violence.

"Hmm...well, I guess it's fine."

For the moment, I decided to bring one or two down. If that was enough to send the rest running, I could collect some teeth and claws, bury the bodies, and be done with it. If they didn't run, I could figure something else out then.

In quick succession, I nocked two arrows and let them fly. My target was a particularly large wolf in the pack. If it was the leader, taking it down had a good chance of scattering the others. The first arrow struck the wolf in the eye, causing it to yelp with pain and surprise. As it reeled backward, the second arrow found its home inside the wolf's mouth.

"Good." I felt a small sense of satisfaction as I watched both arrows hit their mark. It was good to have a skill you could be proud of, regardless of what it might be. Beyond what it could do for your self-confidence, under the right circumstances it could even save your life.

With their leader struck down, the other wolves were immediately put on edge. The moment I lifted my bow again, they scattered into the forest.



I see...

It seemed these monsters were more intelligent than I had thought. I was glad I didn't have to kill any more than that, but I would almost certainly encounter more in the future. I would need to be careful.

"Okay, that's good. Thanks." Patting the tree that had helped me and giving it a word of gratitude, I hopped off of the branch and landed back on the ground.

Pulling the stone knife out from my bag, I quickly acquired the teeth and claws from the expired wolf. A simple stone knife wasn't enough to cut through the hide of a forest wolf, but with a bit of skill, I was able to extract the fangs and claws from the softer flesh surrounding them.

"Spirits of the wind."

Putting the teeth and claws away in my ivy bag, I called out softly to the spirits around me, allowing me to invoke their powers. In response to my will, the spirits of the wind created two opposing vortices of air, grinding up the flesh and bones of the forest wolf.

In all honesty, it was a somewhat grotesque scene, but doing this allowed the earth to reclaim the nutrients in the wolf's body faster, providing better nourishment to the trees. This was my way of repaying the trees for their help. Of course, it was really the spirits doing the work, but with no bodies or physical desires of their own, it was harder to return that favor. The best I could do was remember to be grateful.

"Now then..."

With the cleanup finished, I returned to the task at hand. My journey to a settlement outside the Great Pulha Woodlands would likely involve many more similar encounters. After all, I was still only a single step outside the barrier. I still had a long way to go.

That being said...

"The outside world really is stimulating, isn't it?" A smile rose to my face. Even a chance encounter like this was fresh and exciting to someone like me who had spent so long living a peaceful life among the elves. Just thinking about

how I'd use these fangs and claws had me feeling giddy.

The larger fangs could be carved into something like a shortsword or a long knife, and I could likely find some other crafts to make with the smaller ones. I would feel bad for the wolf if I failed and ruined the material it had provided for me, so it would probably be best to start by finding someone who could teach me to make knives and other small trinkets.

Either way, my first goal was to find another settlement. I wasn't childish enough to skip through the forest as I left, but it wasn't easy to suppress the urge as anticipation urged me onward.



Bad news: making it out of the Great Pulha Woodlands took me half a month.

I hadn't considered how long it could actually take. I had found a river and followed its flow so I would have easy access to water if I ever wanted to wash myself, but maybe that had been a mistake. I'd encountered numerous monsters who had likely come to the river for water, and I had even been attacked by fish. The water spirits alerted me to any imminent danger, but I'd still get chomped if I was too slow.

But that was in the past now. Munching on some fruit, I finally emerged out of the forest and into the outside world. Seeing a wide-open grassland, the view unobstructed by trees as the sunset cast a red glow over the scenery, I was moved to the point of trembling. The word "horizon" sprang to my mind for the first time in what seemed like forever. This was a vast world, stretching on endlessly. It had to come to an end somewhere, of course, but in that moment I couldn't help but feel otherwise.

Unfortunately, I didn't have the time to soak in the atmosphere. In the distance, I could see a settlement surrounded by stone walls: a city. I began to walk quickly, hoping to reach it before the gates shut for the night.

"Vistcourt" was written on a board beside the gate. It was probably the name of the town.

"Well, if it isn't an elf. What are you all spaced out for? Never been to a city before?" Seeing me staring in wide-eyed wonder at the majestic gate and stone

walls, a man with a spear—likely a city guard—called out to me, concerned. Perhaps because of the time of day, there were no others at the city gate, making him the first human I had seen in my one hundred and fifty years in this world.

“I was just admiring the gate. Human, this is my first time coming to a city. Did I make it in time? Can I enter?” Though it was no more than intuition, he didn’t seem like a bad person. So I approached with a smile, showing him my hands were empty as I asked to enter the town.

“So it *is* your first time. There’s a toll if you want to get in, though. Do you know anything about money? If you have identification from another town, it’s twenty coppers to enter. Otherwise, it’s one silver,” the guard said, scratching his head with a frown.

I see. Naturally, unlike other elves, I had memories of living as a human, and so I understood the meaning and significance of currency. However, understanding it didn’t mean I had any, so I shook my head sadly.

“Uh, well, you need money to get into the city. Are you visiting someone who lives here? In that case, I could call them over and they could pay for you.” This guard really did seem to be a nice guy.

Unfortunately, the only reason I had come to this town was because it happened to be the first one I saw after leaving the forest. My only option seemed to be selling the parts of the forest wolf I had harvested and using some of that money to pay for entry. But even so, I wasn’t fond of that idea. I already had my heart set on making something to wear out of them.

“Um, excuse me. May I interrupt?” a voice called out from behind me. I turned around to find a young man and two young women.

How long have they been there?

From my perspective as an elf, all humans were young, but these three were young even by human standards. But on closer inspection, one of the women was actually an elf. There was a chance she was older than me.

The one who had called out to us was the elven woman, looking every bit an adventurer in her leather armor. As the guard and I stared back at her in

confusion, she hurriedly pulled me away from the gate by the arm.

“Are you perhaps a high elf, sir?” she asked in a whisper. Elves could see something like a soft glow around high elves. It was a natural result of our immortal souls, so it wasn’t something I could really hide. Not that it was something I would *want* to hide. I nodded in response to her question, pain written on my face from how forcefully she pulled on my arm.

An expression flitted across her face, a mix of understanding who I was and confusion as to why I was here. I found the look rather interesting, so for the moment I forgave the pain in my arm. Getting angry at a girl over something so trivial would be rather petty of me.

“Um, if it is not too much trouble to ask, may I inquire as to why a person like you would be at a human settlement?” She seemed completely baffled by my presence.

I supposed it wasn’t that strange for her to feel that way. I would doubt my own eyes if I saw another high elf in a human settlement. High elves lived together with the forest, and when they died, they turned into spirits and became one with the natural world. They lived their lives to reach that goal and considered the outside world only a petty distraction. That’s just how high elves were, but I was the exception.

“Yeah, I got sick of the forest. I wanted to see the rest of the world. Oh, you can call me Acer, by the way. That’s what they called me in the Forest Depths.”

When I was a baby, I grabbed a maple leaf carried by the wind out of the air, so they named me Acer. That was more of a nickname than a proper name, though. The elders always called me the Child of the Maple.

Most spirits didn’t take names at all, so high elves didn’t often take names either. But that was rather inconvenient for daily life, so most of us had nicknames. You might think the distinction was only semantic, but if you said that to a high elf, they’d get very upset with you. And by that I mean they would immediately attempt to kill you. So if you had no intention of picking a fight with them, it’d be best to never bring it up.

The elven woman’s expression in response to my words very clearly showed just how bizarre she found me. It was really interesting how much her face gave

away what she was thinking. She had likely lived in the outside world for quite some time. The thought that this was how elves became from living out here made me a little happy. It was like seeing a plant that had turned into an animal. That's not to say there was anything wrong with plants or that animals were inherently better. It was just an interesting thing to see.

The elven woman took a moment to think before speaking again. "Very well, Lord Acer. My name is Airena. Perhaps it is rude for me to take such liberties with a high elf such as yourself, but as a fellow elf, I wish to assist you. Might you leave the resolution of this situation to me?"

It seemed like she wanted to help me. I couldn't help but wonder why, but I didn't sense any ill intent from her. Most importantly, the spirits had no complaints about her, so she couldn't be that bad of an elf.

"Okay, thanks. I was a bit stuck on how I was going to get into town, so that helps a lot. But you don't have to call me 'lord' or whatever." I held out my right hand, offering a handshake.

Rather than accepting the handshake, however, Airena dropped to one knee, took my hand in both of hers, and pressed it to her forehead.

Okay, that wasn't what I meant at all. Looks like getting along with elves is going to be a problem after all.

I was thankful she was willing to help, but once I got inside the city, I'd have to part ways with her quickly.



"The six-star team White Lake attests to the identity of Lord Acer and will be paying the toll for his entry," Airena said to the guard before the two stepped away to do some paperwork. As I stared blankly at them, the humans traveling with her stepped up to my side and explained what that meant.

Apparently, a new adventurer was given a single star, and seven stars was the highest rank possible. That made this group one position away from the highest rank. There weren't many seven-star adventurers in the country, so their group held the highest rank within the city of Vistcourt. They were quite proud to point that out. It did seem impressive in some way, so for now I applauded

them. But I had no idea how many adventurers were in this town, so being the best of them didn't tell me much. The woman gave a bitter smile, but the man seemed satisfied, so I supposed my reaction was fine. Personally I was more curious about the name "White Lake" than about any number of stars they might have, but it didn't seem like the appropriate time to ask about that.

Once the paperwork was finally complete, the guard called me over.

"Hey, good news. You're allowed into the city, just like you asked. But you better be careful. This girl is vouching for you, so if you cause any problems inside, she'll be in trouble too."

He gave me some information about the city. Most of it was obvious stuff, like "no stealing" and "no drawing weapons in public except in self-defense." The most important thing seemed to be that anyone staying in the city for more than a week without citizenship had to pay a tax at the town hall.

By the way, though drawing weapons was prohibited in public, certain places like weapon shops and the adventurer's guild allowed it, and of course you could do so in your private room. You couldn't even do routine maintenance on them if that weren't the case, so I guess that was a given.

"Okay, please write your name here. Acer, huh? I'm a city guard, name's Rodna. If you need anything, give me a shout. And with that, welcome to Vistcourt, Acer." After I signed my name on the paper he provided, Rodna smiled and patted me on the shoulder.

Looking around, I noticed it had become quite dark. He must have left the gate open so that I wouldn't be locked out. As I walked into the town with Airena and her companions, they shut the gate behind us.

I had finally made it into a human city, but unfortunately it was already night, so there weren't that many people around.

"So, Lord Acer, do you have any plans on what to do next?" Airena said as I looked at the town around me. "If not, I highly recommend you register as an adventurer so that you might obtain some personal identification."

Ah, that's right. I still needed to decide what I was going to do from now on. But there was something I was more interested in than becoming an

adventurer.

“I don’t think I want to be an adventurer quite yet. First I want to visit a blacksmith. Where’s the best blacksmith here?” The first thing I wanted to do was learn to craft the fangs and claws of the forest wolf I had harvested into a knife and other trinkets. I figured the best place to do that would be a blacksmith, and if I was going to learn from them, I wanted to learn from the best. But...

“Um...the most skilled blacksmith in this city is a dwarf, so it is unlikely he would be willing to offer his services to elves like us,” Airena answered with a bitter expression.

I see...

Elves and dwarves typically hated each other, so a dwarf probably wouldn’t want to sell anything to Airena or me. That wouldn’t be too much of a problem, though. I didn’t have any money in the first place, so it wasn’t like I would be able to buy anything. *But a dwarf, huh?*

“That’s fine. I want to meet a dwarf too, so that’s even better. Oh, if you don’t like dwarves though, you can just tell me where it is and I’ll go myself.”

This was actually perfect. The chance he would be willing to teach me anything was rather low, but it would be a good opportunity to see what dwarves were like with my own eyes.

“Um...do you not dislike dwarves yourself, Lord Acer?” Airena looked at me like she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. I had expected to see looks like that from elves the moment I decided to put my life as a high elf behind me, so in the face of her disbelief, I just smiled.

“It would be weird to hate someone I’d never met, wouldn’t it?”

Airena averted her gaze.

According to elvish myth, dwarves stole a fragment of flame from nature, trapping it in a forge and ruining nature’s perfection, but there was no way that was actually true. The story implied that dwarves had a perfect mastery over nature, but if that were the case, they would have wiped out the elves they detested a long time ago. The story was only a metaphor at most. I couldn’t see

any elf that took it literally as anything more than a fool.

That said, such a deeply ingrained hatred wouldn't be wiped away by a few cheap words. I had no intention of trying to change the way Airena thought. As long as I could live the way I wanted to, I'd be happy.

"Oh, but it's already night. If I went now, I'd just be bothering him. I should probably start by finding a place to stay for the night. Oh, right. Airena, would you be interested in buying any of these?" I pulled out an apua from my bag and put it in her hand. I hadn't considered selling one of these at the gate because a human likely wouldn't know what it was just by seeing it. But as an elf, Airena likely would. The abundant life force hidden within each fruit kept it from rotting. Even half a month after being harvested, the apuas I had were still fresh and juicy.

"Huh? Is this...?" Looking at the fruit in her hand, Airena's face grew pale.

I had been a little worried that the stories passed between elves of apuas being highly valued in the outside world was all a misunderstanding or exaggeration. But judging by her expression, those stories seemed to be true. I couldn't help but feel a little relieved. I was only able to get into the town because of Airena, and I only knew about the blacksmith because she had told me. After all she had done for me, I needed to thank her somehow.

"That one is a gift for you. Thanks, you really helped me a lot." I then pulled out a second and put it in her hand. Apuas were a favorite food among elves. I had grown rather sick of them after so long, but I was sure I'd start longing for them again once I stopped eating them for a while.

Her companions watched the exchange between us in confusion, while Airena herself took some time to recover from the shock. When she did, she made me promise not to show these fruits to anyone so easily ever again and to put off visiting the blacksmith so she could teach me about living in human society. Between her serious expression and the way she suddenly abandoned the reverence she had been showing to me for being a high elf, she was actually rather terrifying. So for now, I decided to take her up on the offer.



"Excuse me!"

Two days after arriving in the city of Vistcourt for the first time, I finally reached the blacksmith shop. I realized there was a very high chance my request to learn craftsmanship would be declined, so my primary objective was to meet a dwarf for the first time. As such, it was important to present myself as assertive and energetic. To be honest, I had been totally exhausted when I reached the city, so Airena's demand that I spend a day learning from her had been a blessing in disguise.

I understood the currency used here perfectly. A hundred copper coins was equal to one silver coin. Ten silvers was a small gold coin. Ten small gold coins was a large gold coin. In exchange for the apua I sold to Airena, she had given me fifty of those large gold coins.

A basic meal might cost a few copper coins. The room I stayed in the night before was quite luxurious and even had its own private bathtub, but the price of a night there, including all the fantastic food I ate, only amounted to five silvers.

Though it was very much just a rough impression, one copper seemed to have a value of around one hundred yen, making a silver worth about ten thousand yen. For the past two days, and likely for tonight as well, Airena had insisted on paying for my room. But when I thought about how much that would cost in terms of yen, I felt really bad. But I *had* asked her for a cheap place to stay, and she was the one who had vehemently refused and picked this particular inn, so for the time being I supposed it was fine to indulge in her generosity. The inn served fantastic foods like stew filled with plenty of meat, bread that was a little stiff but rich in flavor, and generously seasoned steaks, so I had no desire to cheap out on my lodgings now.

Putting all of that aside, the more pressing issue was the dwarf. The storefront displayed various kinds of weapons and armor, with the actual smithy located in the back. There was no way he hadn't heard me, but the sound of metal striking metal from the back of the store continued unabated, so I contented myself with looking around the shop for now. If it was something he couldn't put down, I had no intention of getting in the way of his work.

The front of the store was crowded with all sorts of wares, from brutally practical looking swords, to resplendently decorated armor, to tools I couldn't

even imagine how to use. Among them, my eye was drawn in particular to a large kukri, an almost boomerang-shaped knife with the cutting edge on the inside of the curve. Though it was large for its kind, it was still in the realm of knives and shortswords, so it didn't compare to other weapons like axes and greatswords. But this kukri had a quiet aura about it, one that said it wouldn't lose to any such large weapons.

Of course, I couldn't touch it without permission. No matter how much it entranced me, it was still a weapon. If I picked it up without approval from the store's owner and hurt myself, it would be a huge problem for them. Well, an elf like me visiting a shop owned by a dwarf may have been trouble enough, but that was a different matter entirely.

"Yo, thanks for waiting. You've got a good eye. That's no ordinary steel you're looking at... Hey, you're an elf, aren't you?! What do you want in my shop?! I've got nothing to sell to no damned elf!" As I stared endlessly at the kukri, a voice called out behind me, gentle at first but quickly turning to angry shouting.

Turning around, I found a short, muscular man glaring at me. His long hair had been tied up to keep out of his way. His appearance shouted "dwarf" so loudly that I couldn't help but smile at seeing him.

"Hello! This is a fantastic kukri. I'd love it, but I'm not here for shopping, you damned dwarf. I do want it though! I really do! But I've already decided on the material I want to use for a knife! Oh, sorry. Here, I brought this gift as a peace offering."

This was every bit a battle. I answered with a boisterous shout loud enough to match the dwarf's angry rant. But of course, I couldn't forget that the bottle I had brought for him was glass, so I made sure to hand it over carefully. One's first greeting and gift were an important part of etiquette.

"You're being awfully polite. Wait, who'd you call a damned dwarf?! You damned elf! How dare you bring such good alcohol! Damn, this really *is* good stuff..." Perhaps taken aback by my politeness, the dwarf's demeanor also softened. "If you're not here to buy something, what do you want? I appreciate the drink, but if it's for something stupid, I'm still kicking you out."

Yeah, it seems like he's a good person after all.

You really couldn't judge someone before you met them. I was extremely grateful he was willing to hear my request at all. Though that may have just been because of the bottle, which had set me back an entire large gold coin all on its own.

I took out the forest wolf fangs from my bag and put them on the counter. "On my way out of the forest, I killed a forest wolf and took these fangs. I want to make them into a knife, and I was hoping you could teach me how."

The dwarf raised an eyebrow, then took one of the fangs in his hand to get a closer look. He was careful with the fangs and studied them with a serious eye. After a few minutes of careful inspection, he set the fang back on the counter.

"I thought you were weird, but it looks like you're an idiot too. This is no forest wolf fang. It came from a much larger grand wolf. You'd need a lot more than a few pointers from me to learn how to work with something like this."

Well that was a shock. How did I make that mistake? I'd assumed all of the wolves in the forest would be...forest wolves. Apparently that wasn't the case.

"Yeah, I definitely didn't want to mess it up, so that's why I came here. I heard you were the best blacksmith in the city. I don't have any of its fur or meat, so I wanted to make sure I didn't waste the fangs and claws I do have." I carefully put the fangs, which I now knew to belong to a grand wolf, back into my bag. As I did, the dwarf spoke again.

"If you don't want to fail, it'd be better to ask me to make it. If you're tough enough to hunt grand wolves, you'd make plenty of money as an adventurer without learning a skill like this."

He really was a kind person, wasn't he? He was all but saying he'd be willing to make a weapon for me. But that wasn't what I wanted, so I shook my head with a smile.

"I'm not that interested in being an adventurer yet. I want to do more than make a single knife, and I'm interested in blacksmithing itself. You're as interesting as I'd hoped you'd be, and I'd like to see the forge as well. I'd rather spend a decade or two learning blacksmithing than going adventuring."

The dwarf looked at me like he was seeing some sort of bizarre animal for the first time. Well, that's about the reaction I expected. I was aware that what I was saying was bizarre for an elf. But compared to my time as a human, this life span was so much longer. In the end, I needed to live true to myself more than anything else, even if nobody else understood. That's what I had decided when I gave up my life as a high elf.

The dwarf sighed. "So you're not an idiot; you're just insane. Fine. I'll take a madman over those arrogant elves any day. If you're willing to work, you can learn blacksmithing from me 'til your head's on straight. I would feel bad for the grand wolf if you wasted its fangs, after all!"

No matter what path I took, even if no one understood me, I would eventually cross paths with others. I held out a hand to the dwarf, who spent more time staring at it than he had at the materials I showed him earlier. But after realizing I wasn't going to give up, he finally broke and shook it.



"Wh-Wh-What are you doing manning a shop for a *dwarf*, Lord Acer?!"

A couple days after I had bullied the dwarven blacksmith into making me his apprentice, Airena came by to check up on me. That was the first thing she said after seeing me sitting at the front counter, playing with a ring puzzle.

This puzzle in particular was one that the blacksmith, or rather Master Damned Dwarf, made at my request. Ring puzzles like these needed to be made with utmost precision, so the fact he was able to put one together so easily demonstrated his incredible skill in craftsmanship. Never mind if he was good enough to be a teacher, I doubted I'd be able to find someone better.

As far as why I called him Master Damned Dwarf: as long as he referred to me as "that damned elf," I had no intention of referring to him in any other way.

In the meantime, I looked forward to mass-producing these ring puzzles and spreading their frustration throughout the world once I had mastered the art of blacksmithing.

"He said if I worked for him, he'd teach me. And he's paying me too, so why not?"

But even a full day's pay wasn't enough to afford a night at the inn I was currently staying at, so I'd need to find another place to live before Airena's generosity came to an end. I couldn't imagine anywhere else having food as good, though, so once I had my own place I'd have to either start cooking for myself or find a nice restaurant.

The rings in my hand clattered together as I toyed with them, and as I found just the right angle, they smoothly slid apart. Yes, these ring puzzles were an endless source of frustration, but the satisfaction of that moment was unmatched. My mood having been brightened by this success, I turned to the next one.

"That is not the issue! You must know that the scent of iron on your body will frighten the trees and earn the enmity of the spirits! What will you do if the spirits abandon you?!" Airena's angry tirade was enough to make Master Damned Dwarf step away from his work and peek into the storefront. Surprisingly, he didn't have anything to say. Instead, he just nodded to himself, realizing that she was an ordinary elf. It almost seemed like he sympathized with her for a moment, for some reason.

Aside from him, I had Airena's misconceptions to deal with. Despite being strange for an elf, I was still a close friend of the spirits, so I couldn't let her misunderstanding go.

"Yeah, I'm aware, but I think you're wrong about that. The spirits don't mind if someone smells like metal. Oh, it does make food taste a little different though, so I have the wind spirits erase the smell from me every day."

I didn't really want my body odor to be noticeable to others, so I'd made sure to bathe every day since arriving in the city. Maybe I was a bit delicate like that, but I was sure anyone would get hurt if told they smelled. And besides, I had already confirmed with the spirits that they didn't mind the metals. There were spirits of fire in the forge itself, and the wind spirits continued to hover around me as soon as I stepped outside. My guess was that the story of spirits hating metal came from their anger toward pollution caused by mining. The elves who noticed that probably assumed the spirits hated metal in general, and so the story spread.

“As for the trees, if they were really afraid of metal, adventurers wouldn’t be allowed into the Great Pulha Woodlands, would they? Sure, they’d be scared of things like axes cutting them down, but they aren’t so weak and sensitive that you need to worry about the smell of metal.”

If the trees were concerned about metal in general, it would probably be from the pollution caused by mining as well. What she said wasn’t completely wrong, but it wasn’t really a reason for me to give up my job.

“I bet if we put a potted plant in here, it would still get along fine with me. Hey, Master Damned Dwarf! This shop needs more green in it. Do you mind if I get a potted plant?” I turned to ask as soon as the thought occurred to me, but the dwarf just gave a snort and returned to his work. I was pretty sure that was his way of saying “do whatever you want.”

When I looked back to Airena, she was staring at me in shock. She was having trouble digesting what I had said, my claims warring against common sense in her head. But that was to be expected. It seemed ordinary elves like her couldn’t see the spirits or speak with the trees as easily as a high elf like myself could. The words passed down by the elders were the source of her truth, and she had probably never had a reason to doubt them before.

Unlike the other elves, high elves tended to shut themselves away deep in the forest, holding no interest in the outside world. They didn’t have much desire or opportunity to share their knowledge of the spirits with others. Even if the other elves started spreading mistaken information, they wouldn’t feel obligated to correct them.

“Anyway, if you’re interested I can teach you more, but right now I’m at work, so I’d appreciate it if you bought something. I recommend that kukri over there. Don’t you think it’s incredible? I’d be pretty sad if it disappeared from the shop, but that’s my recommendation if you want something.”

For example, some elves believed that fire fed on wind, so naturally fire spirits would eat wind spirits and be a danger to them. It may sound obvious, but that wasn’t really true. In reality, wind and fire spirits often worked together. While wind spirits did inhabit the wind, the spirits themselves were immaterial and indestructible. Even if the wind were consumed by fire, it wouldn’t bother the

spirits in the least.

In addition to that, fire really just consumed the oxygen in the air, which the wind brought to it. Powerful fires also gave birth to strong winds. In that way, fire and wind spirits worked together. And when they did, the resulting damage could be terrifying. That kind of knowledge may have been dangerous to spread around, but Airena seemed like a kind enough person that I wasn't worried about telling her anything.

"This knife, you mean? Wow, it *is* quite large. And very masterfully crafted as well. But this was made by the dwarf, correct? Would he not be upset if you were to sell it to me?" Airena gulped as she inspected the kukri I had recommended to her.

Yes, it was really a fantastic piece. I didn't know if he'd get angry or not, but I didn't really care either. Master Damned Dwarf had said he had nothing to sell to any damned elves when we first met, but a sale was still a sale, so I was sure he wouldn't be too upset. And even if it wasn't my money, seeing more in the store's wallet at the end of the day was part of the fun. Besides, if Airena bought the kukri, I might be able to convince her to show it to me once in a while.

"I'm sure it'll be fine as long as you treat it carefully. But if you don't take care of it properly, he'll get really mad. On another note, you should really bring your two friends here. You said this is the best blacksmith in the city, but it seems he's not all that popular, is he?"

Ever since I had started working here, Master Damned Dwarf had rarely come out of the forge. He clearly put more effort into forge work than sales. There was no doubt he was the most skilled blacksmith in the city, but if I was going to work here, I wanted it to be the most popular one in town as well. Being busier would leave less time for me to learn, but if we were successful enough, we could hire more people. The damned dwarf would get to spend more time in his forge, and I'd get to make more friends. It was a total win-win.

To that end, I wanted to bring Airena's White Lake group in as regular customers, since they were apparently the best adventurers in town. I'm sure they hadn't come here before out of consideration for Airena herself. But if the

best adventurers in the city took a liking to a particular blacksmith, many who followed in their footsteps would take an interest in it as well.

“You can see things I cannot, I suppose. No, perhaps rather than ‘cannot,’ I should say ‘would not.’ Very well. Clerk, please sell me this knife. I will treat it with great care.”

I returned Airená’s smile with one of my own. After that, we picked a sheath and belt to match the knife, and I gave her instructions on how to care for the blade, word for word from what I was taught. Master Damned Dwarf looked out at us from the forge every once in a while, but he didn’t say anything, so our choice of accessories and my explanation must have been good enough.

There was no way something as simple as this would dispel even a little of the enmity between the elves and the dwarves, but a fantastic weapon had passed into the hands of a skilled adventurer. That alone was enough for me to celebrate.



A month had passed since my arrival in Vistcourt. My work at the blacksmith shop had been going smoothly, and there was a clear increase in the number of customers. As expected, news of Airená and her companions in White Lake coming here to equip themselves brought a flood of new customers. I suppose an elf working at a dwarf’s shop was rare enough to also bring some curious people by.

My progress in learning blacksmithing was moving slowly. Since I could see the fire spirits, my main job was to manage the temperature of the forge, but over time I was able to help out with more and more tasks. Beyond my ability to borrow the powers of the spirits, Master Damned Dwarf had also recognized my skill with my hands, so I suspected he would soon start teaching me for real. I had originally planned to spend ten or twenty years learning blacksmithing, so I wasn’t especially concerned if we started off slowly.

But although my work and training with the blacksmith was going well, not everything went so smoothly for me. For example, I got lost on my way to pay the tax for visitors staying more than a week in the city. Also, I felt bad making Airená put me up for a whole month, but she simply wouldn’t allow me to rent

my own house. There were plenty of problems that left me feeling helpless like that.

By the way, Master Damned Dwarf was paying me two silvers a day to work for him. Since I took one day off a week, my total weekly pay was one small gold and two silvers—more than the average pay for a working man in the city. For someone being kept on as an apprentice, my situation was apparently rather unprecedented.

However, the place I was staying at cost five silvers a night, meaning a full week was three small golds and five silvers, far outstripping what I was earning. Airena insisted she was fine paying for it as I was teaching her about Spirit Arts, but that meant I was receiving a salary from my teacher while my student paid for my living expenses. Never mind being a high elf, anyone would find that situation a little uncomfortable.

“And that’s my situation. Honestly, I have no idea what to do.” I grumbled out my pent-up feelings, downing the last mouthful of ale from a wooden mug.

My partner in gripes was the first person I had met in this town, or in more dramatic terms, the first human I had ever met in this world, the guard Rodna. He was kind enough to take the same day off and introduce me to a restaurant with cheap but good food.

“I don’t think there’s anything you can do about that. She’s your guarantor, right? There’s plenty of reasons she can’t leave you on your own.” Rodna laughed, biting another chunk of sausage off his fork. There was no malice in his smile; he seemed to honestly be enjoying his time chatting with me over some food and drink.

That said, this was a great restaurant. Though the building and furnishings seemed rather old, it was all kept quite clean. The tables were sturdy, so you could lean on them without worry. The sausages were rich and flavorful, and the ale had no hint of sourness to it at all. The waitress was also quite fetching by human standards. Just watching her carry food to the customers with her charming smile was enough to lift your spirits.

“Speaking of that elf girl, she really treats you like royalty, doesn’t she? Airena of White Lake is pretty notorious for refusing to so much as bow her head to

nobility.”

Waving to the waitress as she passed by, Rodna stared intently into my face. He seemed to be looking for something...or maybe he was just curious. Airena’s behavior had been fairly conspicuous, so there were probably plenty of people who had the same question. She showed no respect to the nobles that demanded it, and she showed incredible respect to me, who asked for none of it. She was a complicated person.

Holding up my empty plate, I called over the waitress. “I’m exactly what I look like, though people call me weird pretty often. Oh, two bone-in steaks, please. Do you have fried potatoes here? Ah, guess not. Then another plate of sausages and another round of ale, please.”

The waitress flashed a bright smile before taking my order back to the kitchen, shaking her rear as she went. I really would have loved some fried chicken and potatoes to go with this kind of ale, but unfortunately it seemed this world, or at least Vistcourt, had no culture of deep-fried food.

I wonder if Master Damned Dwarf could make a fryer for me? I’m sure he’d be interested if he saw what we could pair with his drinks.

On the topic of what I’d said before, “I’m exactly what I look like” meant something entirely different to a human compared to an elf. Any elf would clearly be able to see that I was a high elf, but humans couldn’t tell the difference. So to Airena, I was a high elf, just like I appeared, but to Rodna I was just a simple elf. So *technically* I hadn’t lied.

“Really? Well, fine. If you’re set on moving somewhere else though, we can find you a good safe place to stay. That should help her feel a bit more at ease.”

I nodded. I would probably need to rely on him. I was happy enough just to have him listen to my complaints, but the fact he was willing to offer a solution without trying to force it reminded me of how kind and reliable he was.

Between Airena, Master Damned Dwarf, and Rodna, I really felt blessed with the friends I had made.



Adding some charcoal to the forge, I checked on the fire spirits. With just a

few words, sparks sprayed from inside, the spirits showing off their readiness to work hard for the day. After half a year working for Master Damned Dwarf, I had been given responsibility over one particular job: making nails.

Since I'd started working at the blacksmith, I had made a number of new friends among people living near the shop. In doing so, I learned that they had a need for things like nails, knives, pots, and various other articles made from metal. I thought it was odd they would be lacking those things when they lived so close to a blacksmith, but as the most skilled blacksmith in the city, my master only worked on weapons and armor for soldiers and adventurers. Combined with the famed stubbornness of dwarves and my master's stern demeanor, the people living nearby found it difficult to ask him for such daily necessities.

But seeing an elf like me working under him without issue, impressions of him were starting to soften. Though we referred to each other by such aggressive names, others could see that we enjoyed working together. Eventually, a local landlord came by to secretly discuss the issue with me on behalf of the community. He didn't go so far as to ask for knives or pots, but he did wonder if it would be possible for us to make nails.

When I asked Master Damned Dwarf, he took some time to think about it.

"They're only new customers because of you, so give it a shot, you damned elf. I'll show you how."

So today I was making nails.

In truth, even something as simple as a nail came in a number of variations. If they were needed in large numbers, I could use a method called "casting," pouring liquid metal into a mold which would form a solid nail when cooled. But if a small number of nails of a peculiar shape was needed, I would have to use the process of "forging" by taking a piece of heated metal and hammering it into the appropriate shape by hand.

On top of that, nails for different purposes were made of different materials. For example, beyond the ever-popular iron nails, the wealthy had a strong demand for brass nails for their rich, golden sheen.

Not every nail I made could be sold, however. Before I could hand them over

to the locals, Master Damned Dwarf checked to make sure they were up to the standards of the rest of the shop. Naturally, his criteria were extremely strict. The casted nails were one thing, but when it came to the hand-forged nails, he threw out more than ninety percent of them.

Rather than being disheartened at his brutal standards, such high expectations made me feel a lot better about handing successful ones to the customers. If that damned dwarf approved of them, I could proudly sell them to anyone.

On top of that, I could use the number of nails he let pass as a concrete metric for how my skill was improving. It made obvious what my failings were as a blacksmith, and which areas needed improvement most.

I found producing nails like this to be extremely fun. I enjoyed seeing the smiling faces of happy customers, and it was a fun surprise to walk around town and find things built with nails I had made. If I kept working for a hundred years as the houses around us got replaced over time, eventually every nail in the neighborhood would be one of mine. I felt like that would be an interesting life goal.

That said, as fun as it was for now, I didn't know if I could enjoy it for a hundred years. I grew tired of things easily, so I probably wouldn't be able to keep going for more than a decade or two.

After a month of making nails, about a third of my nails were passing the dwarf's inspection. By the third month, almost half were making it through.

As time went on, the shop steadily gained more business, so we finally hired some others to help. The new hires were two mothers with young children who lived in the area. Each of them worked three days a week, alternating days on and off. While one was working, the other would take care of both of their children. On my days off, I would occasionally be invited over to their homes and play with the kids.

Human children grew up extremely fast, so it was fun to watch them. Even after only a few weeks of not seeing them, they looked bigger than before. The kids playfully called me "the damned elf" as well, but I worried they'd have

issues later in life if they adopted such dirty language. I felt it was better to correct that sooner rather than later. I didn't want them growing up as stubborn and rebellious as me and that damned dwarf.

I eventually started making things other than nails, like staples. In this world, or at least in Vistcourt, there didn't seem to be anything like construction staples or metal ties. When I showed them to the damned dwarf, he had been quite impressed. It was impossible to make smaller versions of them with the available technology, but these larger ones could be used to help bind wood together.

As I took over the work of producing nails, I ended up having a lot of extra work, but my pay increased to match it. Airena was still paying my living expenses, but I was getting more and more eager to become independent. As expected of an elf, her idea of looking after me for "a little while" was turning into a tremendously long period of time.

I had been thinking of renting a house for a long time, but at this point I had made enough money to consider actually buying one, so I began looking around. If I could find one close to the smithy, I'd be living in a relatively safe area around people I already knew. Airena had been away from the city for a while on a long expedition, but I would talk things through with her once she returned.



"We need your help to deal with a crazed water spirit. Would you assist us?" A priestess belonging to White Lake named Martena approached me. To put it simply, she was one of Airena's teammates.

White Lake had been away from the city for a long while, working on some mission or other. After over a month, Martena was the only one to return, and she had sought me out at the blacksmith as soon as she'd arrived.

There was no way I could grasp the whole situation with how suddenly she'd sprung that request on me, but what I *did* understand was how much of a scene we were making. Our blacksmith shop was frequently visited by adventurers, and here was a member of the strongest team of adventurers in the city all but begging me for help. Glancing to the side, I saw Master Damned Dwarf give me

a nod and jerk his chin to the side, so I took Martena out of the shop.

I didn't know what was going on, but she was a friend of Airena's, whom I owed considerably. Of course it depended on the details of her request, but I wasn't about to ignore her out of hand. That being said, her request had me confused right from the start.

She had mentioned a water spirit. Spirits were immaterial, indestructible beings. That applied to their minds as well, so it shouldn't have been possible for one to go insane. But even so, I took Martena back to the inn and asked her to explain things in detail. White Lake had a yearly contract at the same inn I'd been staying at, so their rooms were reserved even when they were away on long-term excursions. If we wanted to talk without having to worry about curious eyes and ears around us, this was the best place to do it.

After hearing the story from Martena, I pressed a hand to the side of my head, trying to suppress a growing headache. The situation seemed like far too much trouble for me to want to get involved, but I couldn't imagine anyone else who was capable of resolving it. And besides, if I ignored her request, the consequences would probably affect me here anyway.

White Lake had received the mission from Garalate, a city about two weeks' worth of travel from Vistcourt. That struck me as somewhat odd. White Lake was certainly the strongest group of adventurers in Vistcourt, but they were hardly the best in the country. Garalate likely had plenty of their own adventurers, and together with the cities around them, there should have been plenty of six-star teams to call on. But they had specifically requested the help of White Lake.

There was only one reason they would do that: they needed someone who excelled in Spirit Arts, an elf like Airena. Apparently, the mission had been to purify the river from the curse of a mad water spirit, since it served as the city's main source of water. That seemed reasonable enough to me. If someone in Garalate had done something to anger the water spirit, it wouldn't be surprising if people had started getting sick from drinking the water there. I could understand why they would call a spirit of nature "mad" when it tried to hurt them, seeing as they were making no attempt to find what they themselves might have done wrong. Of course they thought everything would be resolved if

they simply called upon an elf for help.

But when Martena told me that fish in the river were dying and trees nearby were starting to wither, I realized there must have been a deeper problem. If the water spirit was trying to curse the town, there was no reason for the fish or trees to be affected. If nature was being affected in the same way as the townspeople, I could only imagine it was because the river was being polluted. Of course, it was unthinkable that a water spirit would pollute the water it lived in. So then, what was the source of that pollution?

When looking into the city of Garalate itself, I learned that it had been founded just ten years ago when a mine had opened in the area. In short, the source of the issue was pollution caused by mining, and the people were shoving that responsibility onto the water spirit. The lord in charge of Garalate was a newly ascended noble. He had likely been entrusted with developing the mine by order of the king, and so he had focused all his efforts on producing results, paying no mind to its effect on the environment. I didn't know if he was actually unaware of the damage he was causing or if he really had intended to pass responsibility off onto the water spirit. In either case, nothing would be resolved unless we dealt with that noble.

It took everything Airena could manage to keep the raging water spirit from destroying the city, so she couldn't leave her place there. As such, White Lake had decided their only hope for resolving the situation was asking me for help. Another member named Clayas had stayed behind to defend Airena while Martena returned to Vistcourt alone as fast as possible.

While the situation itself was a huge pain, the fact that it clearly showed Airena's growth in the field of Spirit Arts made me a little happy. If she was only interested in completing her mission, she could just dispatch the allegedly mad water spirit. Destroying the water it inhabited would get rid of the contaminated water, which would temporarily prevent the spirit from affecting the world around it. Of course, that wouldn't solve the actual problem at all. The pollution would continue to worsen, and the water spirit would return with even greater fury. Airena grasping the true nature of the situation and coming up with a plan to resolve it was exactly the kind of behavior expected from a friend of the spirits.

And while I was reluctant to help, I realized it would be difficult for me to resolve this situation alone as well. I decided to get Master Damned Dwarf involved, since he was an expert when it came to metals. The pollution problem at Garalate would affect every blacksmith in the country. It was hardly something we could ignore.



The dwarves had been experts in metalworking since ancient times, so they were acutely aware of the damage it could cause. When I explained the situation to Master Damned Dwarf, his face paled and he immediately got to work.

Besides my master, there were many other dwarves living in the Kingdom of Ludoria. The dwarves had a strong influence on the nation's blacksmithing guild, so their opinions held sway even with the king himself. Naturally the guild would need to send representatives to investigate Garalate before they could bring anything to the king, and apparently Master Damned Dwarf intended to be part of that team himself. He suspected that the other dwarves wouldn't take my story seriously.

Well, he was probably right. The suspicion of environmental damage was only conjecture on my part at this point. If the investigation team was made up of dwarves, there was little hope of them hearing me out. I was sure we could get along if we had a chance to fight, drink, and talk about blacksmithing together, but there was no time for that. So Master Damned Dwarf decided to come along to help with the political side of things. My job would be to pacify the water spirit, locate the source of the pollution, and decontaminate the soil and water.

The problem was that if Master Damned Dwarf left the forge along with me, we'd most likely have to close the shop. However, the ladies we had working with us were very understanding of our situation. If the problem in Garalate was allowed to worsen, the mine would be forced to close and the price of metal would increase. Once news got out, any attempts to open new mines might be met with opposition. As blacksmiths, we couldn't afford to ignore the situation, so the other staff members graciously accepted the time off.

Accompanied by Martena, who knew more than anyone else just how dire the situation was, I headed to Garalate. Master Damned Dwarf left the city with us, but he instead headed to the capital to spur the blacksmithing guild to action.

By carriage, Garalate was two weeks away from Vistcourt. The roads between cities weren't particularly safe, as they were overrun by bandits and monsters alike, but the regular convoys were well armed to protect themselves. And our carriages only carried travelers, while bandits were more likely to save their efforts for the more appealing merchant caravans. So aside from a few encounters with monsters on the way, we made it to Garalate without incident.

If there *was* a problem to mention, it would be that I got carsick on the way there. The irregular shaking of the carriage as it ran over the roads wreaked havoc on my sense of balance. Thinking back on it, I remembered being plagued by car sickness in my previous life as well. As for Martena, she seemed much more relaxed compared to her previous behavior in Vistcourt, as if she were relieved at her success in recruiting me. It felt kind of unfair.

Upon arriving in Garalate, I wasted no time in leaving the city behind. Part of the reason for that was because the mission issued to White Lake had yet to be completed, but really I wanted to leave the political side of the issue to Master Damned Dwarf and the blacksmithing guild. As an elf, I would stand out quite a bit in the city, so though it didn't match my usual style, I felt it was better to act more discreetly.

Our destination was the water spirit's home, the source of the polluted river at the heart of this issue. Martena guided me along the riverbank. The water itself looked normal enough, but I could hear the agonized cries of plant life dying all around us. Even worse, the plants that had little resistance to the metals contaminating their water had already died, unable to even cry out in pain.

Was water from the mines being drained directly into the river after all? For elves and high elves who chose to live in the forest rather than the city, this would be an infuriating sight. Rather than try to pacify the water spirit, they would be more likely to take its side.

But I understood well that the miners themselves had no idea that the pollution they were causing was not only damaging the environment but also condemning themselves and their children to a painful death from its long-term effects.

The majority of people in the city were just trying to live their lives. There was no evil there that could justify exterminating them. The memories of my past life and my experience living in Vistcourt allowed me to see from that perspective.

So I would stop the water spirit. Garalate, the lord who ruled it, and the mines under his control would be dealt with by my friend, that damned dwarf. So I would do what only a high elf living in human society—a damned elf like myself—could.



The source of the river was a large spring.

Ah, I see.

Water spirits often came to be objects of worship for their huge power. If a spirit like that became enraged, no ordinary person would be able to approach it. Destroying a whole city would take little effort. A thick fog surrounded the spring, keeping out would-be intruders. These usually functioned by misdirecting those who entered, sending them back the way they came. But this wasn't something so gentle. If someone tried to approach the spring and stepped into the fog, it would flood into their lungs and return to water, drowning them where they stood.

In short, the spirit living in this spring had fully rejected humanity in its anger. That was why only Airena, an adept Spirit Caller, had been able to approach. Clayas, the warrior of the group, had set up a tent outside the fog and kept watch for her. The days he spent here must have been agonizing. Every day he saw Airena head into the spring alone, unable to do anything but watch. When she returned at night, his feelings of powerlessness during the day would turn to tension as he guarded her sleep. It was clear from his pale complexion and bloodshot eyes that his vigil was wearing him out.

But the moment he saw Martena and me approaching, his eyes flooded with

relief. Seeing Clayas on the verge of collapse, Martena immediately ran to his side to help him stand. I couldn't help but smile at the unfailing trust between the two. I almost felt a little envious. Of course I had friends of my own, but that was entirely different from the mutual faith shared by these comrades in arms.

Then again, I had put my trust in Master Damned Dwarf to deal with the city of Garalate and its lord. Maybe it was appropriate to call him my comrade in arms as well. Just like the members of White Lake, we were both in entirely different places, fighting to achieve the same goal. Thinking of it like that, things started to seem a bit more exciting.

"Good work, you two. Once Airena's back, you can move to a better spot to rest. This is a pretty rough environment for humans."

Just because they were outside of the fog didn't mean they were beyond the reach of the water spirit's wrath. Being helpless to do anything against the ever-present threat made it impossible for one to rest properly. It was probably best for them to leave the area as soon as possible. I also wanted to switch places with Airena as soon as possible, so I decided to head toward the spring right away.

Leaving the two behind, I stepped into the fog. Though it hung ready to drown anyone who entered, it made no effort to hurt me. Instead, it parted before me to create a path. It seemed the spirit was waiting for me as well. If that was the case, Airena had improved far more than I had realized.

"Lord Acer!" Airena called out, relief and joy heavy in her voice as she turned and saw me. It had taken Martena two weeks to return to Vistcourt and another two weeks for us to make it here. That meant Airena had been waiting for almost a month. If this had been a date, she surely would have dumped me on the spot for making her wait so long. Not that I had a girlfriend to get dumped by in the first place.

"Sorry for the wait. You've been working pretty hard here, haven't you? It makes me proud to be your friend." I stepped up beside her, patting her on the shoulder. It was time to trade places.

"I begged the spirit to wait for your arrival, but..." Airena spoke, half in apology and half in frustration. But she'd done enough. If it hadn't been for her

efforts, the spirit may well have already destroyed Garalate. And thanks to her convincing the spirit to wait specifically for me, I could easily take over the conversation from here. The fact that she had managed to restrain the spirit for a month clearly showed her skill in Spirit Arts. I truly believed that was something she could take pride in.

“It’s okay, you can leave the rest to me. I’ll work hard enough to pay you back for all the inn fees. The other two are waiting for you, so go on ahead.”

After saying that, I stepped in front of her. I would show how reliable I was here, and earn Airena’s permission to leave the inn behind and buy my own house.

Before me was a pool of crystal clear water filled by the spring. Some of that water had taken the form of a woman, beautiful and unclothed, the water spirit herself. In contrast to her beauty, her rage had shaped enormous serpents of water, coiling in the air all around her.



If those serpents were let loose, they would flatten the forest around us with ease. But I was confident the water spirit wasn't stupid enough to destroy its own home, so I didn't feel particularly threatened. Seeing her brandish a weapon she would never use was more amusing than anything.

After confirming that Airena had safely made her way out, I took a deep breath.



Spirits listened to what elves had to say because they saw them as juvenile versions of themselves. They were like children to them. It was the same for those rare humans who were able to speak with them. So while spirits might offer help, calm down, or even be pacified by their words, they would never take criticism from them. It was the same as how no matter the logic in a child's side of an argument, no adult would accept it. Of course, the metaphor could only extend so far. Spirits had entirely different senses than people, so the concept of "children" didn't exist for them in the same way. Even so, powerful spirits like this one would occasionally refer to elves and some few humans as their beloved children.

However, things were a bit different when it came to high elves. When we died, our souls separated from our bodies and became spirits. Or so it was said. I had never seen a high elf die myself, so I couldn't say for certain. In short, the soul of a high elf was indestructible in the same way a spirit was. As such, spirits treated us as something closer to equals. Spirits offered their support to high elves, embraced their friendship, and sought mutual understanding with them. Airena must have thought that since she was unable to resolve the situation herself, a high elf like myself might have been able to chastise the spirit and calm its rage.

There was actually another way for an elf to rebuke a furious spirit, though Airena may not have realized it. Rather than speak to the spirit directly herself, she could have enlisted the help of another powerful spirit to intervene for her. But there were a couple factors that made this method dangerous. Since spirits had entirely different sensibilities than we did, the intermediary spirit might not have communicated her concerns properly at all. And in cases like this, it was

possible the intermediary would take the furious spirit's side, making the damage much more severe. So even if Airena knew it was possible or considered such a possibility, it was very much a last resort.

"So, spirit of such a beautiful spring. Could you tell me what has made you so angry?"

Praising a spirit while talking to them was important. But when doing so, one had to avoid speaking of the spirit themselves and rather praise the vessel they inhabited. Expressing understanding of the clarity and purity of the water or the volume of water the spring produced would be a sign of deep respect for a water spirit that inhabited it.

But in this case, where the underground source of water had been polluted, doing so might have enraged the spirit further, so instead I only mentioned the spring's beauty. The feeling behind them was more important than the words themselves. Spirits could clearly see through everything you said, so any attempt to hide your thoughts or feelings while speaking with them would immediately earn their distrust. Naturally, offering insincere words would serve only to anger them.

"_____!"

The spirit opened its mouth, but the furious, high-pitched cry it let loose didn't form any intelligible words. That was ordinary for how the spirits spoke, though, so I was able to glean her thoughts from that cry just the same. It was simply the answer to the question I had posed.

It seemed the issue wasn't as simple as runoff from the mines polluting the water. Long ago—though when it came to spirits, it was impossible to gauge what that actually meant—a tribe of people who had lived in this area held a deep respect for nature. They had always expressed thanks to the forest after a successful hunt, to the river when they fished, and to the spring when they drank water. That respect extended to the water spirit herself, and she came to be an object of worship to them. The spirit had no small amount of love for the people who adored her, and she'd struggled to protect them when great rains caused the river to overflow and threaten their way of life. The kindness she spoke of was hard to believe after seeing her so furious. However, the depth of

her kindness made her anger run just as deep.

As the relationship between her and the small tribe continued to develop, another group of humans invaded the land. The tribe was crushed by the conflict, the survivors scattered and assimilated by the newcomers. The water spirit grieved at the event, but conquest and death were still the way of nature. The water spirit hated such violence, and the small tribe that worshiped her had no desire to drag her into it. Without their request, she was unable to intervene.

It was hard to tell whether the invaders were the people of the current kingdom or not, but regardless, they conquered the entire land. Despite being scattered among the people of the invaders, the descendants of that small tribe continued to revere the water spirit. They had protested greatly against the opening of the mine, and so they had been exiled. The people she had come to love were driven out of the land, and those who took their place had no respect for it, polluting the water without hesitation.

The fish died; the plants withered. The water spirit was angry at them, but she was equally angry at herself for having done nothing for so long. If things were going to turn out this way, she should have just wiped out the invading army herself. She should have protected the people that loved her, no matter how it may have made them fear her.

She could never take back what was lost, but she *could* save the land she and that tribe had loved. She decided to sweep away the invaders that were now polluting that land.

At that time, one of her beloved children appeared. Though the child softened the water spirit's heart, she also strengthened her determination. For the sake of this child and the world she lived in, she would wipe evil away from this world.

In short...things were bad.

As usual, the spirit's short utterance held a terrifying amount of information, but the fact that the water spirit had resolved herself so strongly was also dangerous. If her motivation ran so deep, it might be impossible to change her mind. This wasn't just an issue of one mine.

On top of that, I couldn't help but sympathize with the spirit after hearing her story. No amount of talking would ever appease her. So the goal became not to stop the spirit but to alter its course. This was a spirit of water, after all. Stopping a torrent was incredibly difficult if not entirely impossible, but much of its damage could be averted by redirecting it somewhere else. That was one of the guiding principles of flood control. I never would have expected a high elf like myself to have to deal with such a topic...but I supposed this would be a good experience.

"I understand how you feel now. I know nothing I can tell you will make you stop. But there is still something I want to say. At this rate, your waters will not wash away the true target of your anger."

After sharing her story and realizing that I truly understood her and sympathized with her, the water spirit felt comfortable listening to me. So I spoke. I told her of the weak people that would be destroyed by her anger. I told her of the people working hard to survive, not knowing anything about the conflict, of those who followed orders not knowing what they were doing was wrong. About the mothers struggling every day to raise their children, who were too young to know right from wrong. I emphasized the point about those children and how they were no different from the children of the tribe that worshiped her. If she destroyed them in her anger, she would cease to be the spirit those people had come to love. And above all, the true object of her anger, the ones truly responsible, would remain safe. While the waters would cause trouble for many innocent lives, those at fault would easily survive.

I mentioned that a friend of mine was working to resolve the issue of contamination from the mine. Of course, that wouldn't be resolved immediately, but things would definitely improve over time.

"So, spirit of water. I ask that you do not turn your anger against the wrong people."

In the end, the city of Garalate was not destroyed. Master Damned Dwarf's investigation into the mine turned up obvious issues, so under the guidance of the blacksmithing guild—more specifically, the dwarves in the guild living in the area—measures were put in place to fix them. To prevent similar incidents from happening again, future mines would require the cooperation and oversight of

the blacksmithing guild in order to be opened.

Once it was discovered that the source of the issue was pollution from the mine, and that the water spirit was a victim rather than the cause of the incident, White Lake's contract with the city was considered fulfilled and came to an end.

In short, everything came to be resolved peacefully.

As a result of the damage caused by the mine, the lord responsible for ruling the city was deposed, and the group that protested the mine had their crimes struck from the record. They had surely set up new lives elsewhere by now, so it was hard to say whether they would come back...but I thought it would be nice if they did.

Not long after that, the former lord of Garalate was found dead in his bathtub, having drowned himself. The king of Ludoria, who had appointed and subsequently dismissed him, had also been found drowned in his bath three days later. Rumors spread throughout the kingdom that the disgraced lord had traded his own life to put a curse on the king as revenge for his dismissal, but the truth of the matter would stay hidden in the darkest depths of the water.



Three years after Master Damned Dwarf took me on as his apprentice, and after I had graduated from making nails to all daily necessities, I was finally able to start working on weapons and armor. That said, making these tools of war wasn't much different from those tools of everyday life. They needed to be made sturdier for their use in battle, which sometimes called for differences in the way they were forged, but fundamentally it was just an extension of what I had already learned.

Keeping in mind the final purpose of the item being produced, the metal was more specifically shaped to fulfill it. While it was easy enough to say that, actually accomplishing it was quite difficult but exceedingly fun.

Beyond that, perhaps thanks to spending three years dedicated to learning blacksmithing, I had grown quite a bit more muscular. Of course I still looked tiny compared to my dwarven master, but I suspected there were no other high elves that could compare to my new physique. Once I reached a satisfying level

of skill in my blacksmithing, I figured I'd pick up some skill with a weapon so that I could put my new muscles to use.

Among the humans I knew who used a sword, the first person who came to mind was Clayas. If I asked him to teach me, I was sure he'd gladly accept. Unfortunately, Clayas and all of White Lake was exceedingly busy. They had been promoted to seven stars just recently, so they were beginning to receive requests from cities all over the country. I would feel bad for imposing on him when my only purpose for learning swordsmanship was entertainment.

Perhaps because such thoughts had occupied my mind while I worked, when I showed Master Damned Dwarf the sword I had made, he dismissed it with a laugh, bringing an end to today's practice. I couldn't get angry at him for laughing at it. Before I showed it to him, I was well aware that it was a failure of a piece. Rather, since he had been so clearly dismissive of it, I was able to end my work for the day without hesitation.

My lack of anger reflected my lack of investment in the work. If I wasn't focused on the task, no amount of practice would help me. In fact, continuing while distracted made me liable to hurt myself or develop bad habits that would blunt my skill. So putting it aside for now and working at the storefront was a much better choice.

While I was manning the front, a young man came into the store around dusk. While he looked rather shabby at first, the way he carried himself gave no impression of him being hard off. He stood straight and tall, like one who was willing to suffer greatly to provide for his own needs and live unashamed of his own station.

After looking at the wares on our shelves with great interest for a while, he headed to the discount section of the store. Of course nothing Master Damned Dwarf made would fit in there, so instead it was populated by my own works which had turned out exceptionally well and would be able to survive use in the real world. While they had been made as practice for my blacksmithing, they could be sold to novice adventurers at an affordable price to get them started.

That meant this man was likely an aspiring adventurer himself, here with what little money he could scrounge up from doing odd jobs around town to

get started. Adventurers in Vistcourt typically made their money by hunting monsters or collecting materials in the nearby Sea of Trees. Even White Lake, when they weren't being pulled all over the country by specific requests, spent their free time hunting in the Woodlands. I wondered why they felt the need to make so much money for themselves, but maybe they were more interested in the adventure itself than anything it earned them.

Even if one only intended to harvest the natural resources of the forest, Pulha was home to many monsters. A weapon for self-defense was absolutely necessary. So aspiring adventurers would do whatever odd jobs they could find around town, collecting money so they could afford their first weapon. Even the cheap weapons I had produced were a big purchase for a novice, so it was a serious decision for him.

So while I watched from the side, I didn't say anything to interrupt him. If he asked, I would naturally ask about his skills, plans, and budget so I could recommend the best option for him. But when someone wanted to bet their life on their choice, sometimes unsolicited advice was more of a hindrance.

Though in certain cases, if it looked like they hadn't thought things through properly or their choices would put their own life in danger, I would say something anyway.

After a long deliberation, he finally decided on a mace. That was a good choice. It was a long-handled weapon with a blunt metal head. Its defining characteristic was its sturdiness, with a center of gravity placed near the head to enhance its power when swung. In exchange, it was more cumbersome to position than something like a sword. Basically, it wasn't well suited to feinting or other precise movements needed in fights against human opponents, but it was ideal for easily delivering heavy blows to monsters. Though even against human opponents, it would excel against those wearing full armor where a bladed weapon would fail. It was easy to use and packed a lot of power.

It was a great choice for a starting adventurer that had the muscle to wield it. Many aspiring adventurers got the idea that they needed to start with a sword and so often overlooked blunt weapons like these.

"Um, excuse me. I would like to buy this. Is there any defensive gear you'd

recommend I get with it? Uh, this is my budget,” the young man asked me, a little embarrassed.

Ah, so in this case the choice was because a weapon without a blade would come cheaper.

“Can you use that with one hand easily enough? The weight isn’t too much for you? If so, then I’d recommend a shield, but if you find it too heavy to use in one hand, you’d be better off forgetting a shield and using it with two hands. If you’re planning on heading into Pulha, you’ll also want some leather gear for your feet and legs.”

I felt a little happy when he finally asked for my advice. Would being relied on like that make anyone else feel like a much better clerk? It certainly did for me.

A high elf like myself wouldn’t need anything like armor to make it in the Great Pulha Woodlands, but it was a big mistake to assume humans could do the same. Leather helmets, gauntlets, leggings, and anything else that covered the body was indispensable. If one had to run through the forest, the leaves and branches would be sharp enough to cut flesh. Thicker clothing was enough to protect one’s upper body, but leather armor was ideal for the legs.

Most monsters crawled along the ground on four legs, making them quite a bit shorter than humans. A person could carry a weapon to protect their upper body, but the legs—especially below the knees—were much more difficult to protect like that. Once the legs were injured, a human would collapse and be effectively defenseless. So it was best to start with armor for the legs and, once you started making money, move on to armoring your upper body later. That was what I figured.

Of course, the optimal solution would be to continue working around town until you could afford to fully armor yourself, but that wasn’t my choice to make. I only answered the questions he asked.

Though it was just a hunch, I had the feeling he’d do great as an adventurer. Watching him take a few test swings with the mace, he seemed well muscled and sturdy for a novice adventurer. It was clearly not something he was born with but something he had worked hard to attain. As I watched him, I thought that whether he was lucky enough to be blessed with good companions or not,

as long as he proceeded carefully, he would make enough to be back for a better weapon in the future. Well, I supposed first he would be back to get maintenance done, but at some point he would find that mace insufficient and come back for a replacement. And when he did, if he ended up choosing one of my weapons again, I'd be thrilled.

For that to come true, I needed him to definitely survive, and I needed to improve my skill as a blacksmith to match him. I suddenly felt extremely motivated. After I gave him some basic information on caring for the weapon and told him when he'd need to bring it back for maintenance, he thanked me and left the store behind, satisfied with his purchase.

His name was Astre. Whether it was just for maintenance or not, I looked forward to seeing him again.



Maybe it was a bit late to bring this up, but I didn't really like senseless killing. More specifically, going out of one's way to hunt down and kill something with no intention of eating it. Most elves and high elves were happy to eat nothing but fruit, against even hunting animals for food. But I was a little different from the norm in that respect.

That was why I had no interest in becoming an adventurer, despite constantly hearing how great I would be at it. Of course, I realized that monsters would attack and kill people if not hunted to keep their numbers down. And I understood the need for people like adventurers. After all, I'd met plenty of them during my time working at the blacksmith. I had no ill feelings toward the profession as a whole, but it just wasn't something that interested me very much.

However, I was *very* interested in hunting for food. It was something like a hobby for me, taking my bow to the forest or even the Sea of Trees on my days off. I was pretty good at shooting birds down out of the air, but falling from the sky would damage the meat, so I didn't do it very often. But I did have to settle for it occasionally, if I wasn't lucky enough to meet any monsters and I couldn't handle my cravings for meat.

Thankfully, whenever I entered the Great Pulha Woodlands, I'd encounter

plenty of monsters even when I wasn't looking for them. I was happy enough to find monsters that could be eaten, but there were many out there that couldn't serve as food. Letting them eat me wasn't really an option, so I'd have to kill them if escape became too difficult. And if I came across someone being attacked, I would naturally kill the monsters to protect them.

On that day, my luck wasn't particularly good. While I wondered to myself what I was even doing there, I hid in the shadow of a tree root that had lifted up for me as I clutched tightly to what I held in my arms.

A number of monkey-like monsters were lurking around, looking for their food. There wasn't much value in hunting them, as something about their flesh made them inedible, and their claws, teeth, and fur weren't particularly useful. I didn't really want to get involved with them at all.

Well, their brain was considered a delicacy, and their gallbladder was used in medicines. Regardless, they weren't an appealing target to me. If I ended up having to kill them in a worst-case scenario, I'd just have to try that delicacy for myself, but I hoped it wouldn't come to that.



Five years had passed since I began my study of blacksmithing, and I was starting to grow rather confident in my skills. Just the other day, I had finally begun working on the grand wolf fang. That said, I was well aware that I still wasn't skilled enough to make a knife out of it, as I had originally intended. I wasn't really worried about the possibility I would fail. Rather, I was more hoping to improve my skills so that when I did eventually make the knife, it would turn out much better.

But I realized that there was no end to improving myself. Just watching Master Damned Dwarf, seeing him still learning new things as he worked despite how famous and proficient he already was, made that painfully clear. I would need to compromise somewhere, so for the time being I decided I'd only make the knife once I intended to leave the city.

So instead, I was working on one of the smaller fangs. Though it was one of the smaller fangs, it still came from a grand wolf, so it was pretty sizable. I decided to work with it so that I might learn the intricacies of working with the

material in preparation for turning the largest fang into a knife someday.

But even if it was just practice, I wasn't about to waste any material from a monster I had hunted myself. So I carefully, carefully shaved away at the terrifyingly sturdy fang, shaping it little by little. When I finally reached a spot I was satisfied with, I grabbed a second fang and began the process anew.

While I was working, Master Damned Dwarf came in to look at what I was doing. He picked up one of the finished pieces and examined it closely but left without saying anything.

My first creation from the material the grand wolf provided me was five arrowheads. These would improve the damage my arrows could inflict. Now that they looked even sharper than they had been in the grand wolf's mouth, I took them out to give them a brief test. The arrowheads easily sank into their targets without a sound. I started to realize these were a lot more dangerous than I had first thought. It honestly made it quite a bit harder to consider using them casually.

Next, I made an ornament for me to wear. While leaving the impression that it was sharp and dangerous, I shaved off the actual sharpness of the fangs so they wouldn't hurt my skin. Once they were safely dulled, I drilled a small hole in each fang and claw and passed a cord through them, making an admittedly barbaric-looking necklace.

Strangely, the fangs and claws on the necklace didn't make a sound when they clattered together. I suspected the stealthy nature of the grand wolf, which allowed it to sneak up on prey in the forest, extended to its teeth and claws as well. In short, it was a special characteristic of the material itself.

In that case, if I did make a knife from the grand wolf's fang, would it make no sound when drawn from its sheath? That would make for an excellent assassin's weapon. Maybe the arrowheads sank into the target soundlessly because the material itself was absorbing the sound?

Well, it didn't matter that much. No matter how useful such weapons would be to an assassin, I certainly wasn't about to become one. I had no intention of giving them to anyone else, and if anyone accused me of being an assassin, I could just laugh and deny it. I didn't have a single shady spot in my past.



Maybe that stubborn nature is what led me to the situation in the forest. After making the arrowheads, I felt the urge to try using them for real. So on my next day off, I headed to the Great Pulha Woodlands, where I ended up in this dilemma. I ignored the monsters I encountered that were either inedible or unappealing, heading for the depths of the forest.

The best target for hunting in the Great Pulha Woodlands near Vistcourt was the great silver elk. The elk was pale white in color, sporting a large set of antlers and a stripe of silver fur along its back. Though the Woodlands were home to many animals, this one was said to be the most beautiful and graceful of them all. Its fur commanded a hefty price, measured in large golds.

My interest in the deer came not from the value of its pelt but from the stories I had heard of the uniquely fantastic taste of its meat. Ever since I had heard those tales, I had spent my time in the Great Pulha Woodlands looking for one of the creatures, but I had yet to encounter one.

The fact that a high elf like myself could go out of his way to look for one and not find it was enough to doubt its existence in the first place. But according to the trees, they certainly did exist. They were very fast, though, and perpetually on guard against even the smallest of sounds, so the slightest movement could cause them to bolt. They had probably only ever been seen by humans when the deer had injured their legs and by sheer coincidence been found by people before other monsters got to them.

Today it didn't seem I was to find one either. Instead, I had encountered a baby forest wolf—actually, it was probably a grand wolf—that had strayed from its pack. It was under attack, cornered by the monkey-like monsters leaping from tree to tree around it.

Was it right to free a butterfly caught in a spider's web? Even if it was an act of kindness, the consequence of saving the butterfly was starving the spider. It was very possible that an action to save one life would doom another. It could even be said that this kind of kindness stemmed from the feeling of responsibility one had when holding another's fate in their hands.

I doubted anyone would actually blame somebody for freeing the butterfly in

that situation. No matter what one thought about how ego played into it, it was still an act of kindness. I suppose there would also be cases of people who just disliked spiders, but I didn't think such cases bore consideration.

To reframe the question, if the conflict were between a person and a monster, I wouldn't hesitate to save the person. The situation wasn't all that different, but I just liked people. That was also a result of my ego.

However, if the question was about a monster being attacked by monsters, most people would probably say there was no need to get involved. Though there were some rare exceptions, monsters were generally our enemies. There was nothing to be gained by intervening in a fight amongst themselves. Even the grand wolf pup, as small and pitiful as it seemed, would someday grow to a size where it would attack people.

I had heard stories of people taming monsters, but I had no intention of trying that myself. So when I found myself in this situation, I had no intention to get involved. But the moment the young grand wolf laid eyes on me, it cried out for help as if seeing me as some kind of guardian.

When I heard that pitiful cry, my body began to move on its own. Dashing through the forest, I slipped between the monkeys before they could strike, taking the wolf up in my arms. The razor-sharp claws that had been aimed at the pup lashed out at me as I got in their way, but they were rebuffed by a sudden vortex of wind.

Taken aback by my own actions, I stood stunned for a moment, but I was quickly brought back to my senses by the furious howls of the monkeys. I began running into the forest. Adorable to the point it was almost irritating, the baby grand wolf sat limp in my arms, awash with relief.

What just happened?

With the way the monkeys leaped between the branches, there was no way I could outrun them. I could ask the trees to strike them out of the air, but then I would feel bad for the monkeys. After all, no matter how you looked at it, I was the one who stole their prey.

Calling upon the spirits of the wind to create a strong gust to distract them, I found a place to hide. A large tree nearby lifted one of its roots into the air so

we could duck under it. The root then lowered to cover us and conceal our presence. Of course, our ability to hide all relied on the baby wolf not crying out or struggling. Thankfully, he or she showed no intention of giving us up. Instead, as it sat in my arms, it was sniffing at me. Or more precisely, it was sniffing at the claws and fangs that hung around my neck.

Ahh, so that's what it was.

I let out a deep sigh of realization and started stroking the pup's back. It had all been a simple coincidence.

Though it was in self-defense, I had killed a grand wolf in the past. So it was only fair that I saved the life of this little one in exchange. Perhaps the wolf I had hunted wished for this too.

Though wolves hunted humans, they were still terribly compassionate animals. I couldn't be sure whether I had heard that in my current life or my past one, but I was sure I had heard it somewhere. If the grand wolf I had killed had been the leader of its pack, it was no wonder it would wish for me to save a baby of its own kind. I wasn't surprised it had spurred me on to action.

As I pet the baby wolf in my arms, I wondered just how long we'd spent hiding. The monkeys were persistent, but eventually a distant howling of wolves grew closer. Recognizing the impending danger, the monkeys finally gave up and fled. Crawling out from under the tree root, I put the baby wolf down and stretched. I felt numerous gazes on me from beyond the trees.

"Okay, time for you to go. They came to pick you up. Let's hope we don't meet again," I said, trying not to look down at the pup hovering around my feet. Any more affection between us would only hurt us both. The day had been a total waste, my day off ruined. I wouldn't have time to hunt anymore.

The baby grand wolf lingered around my feet for a time, but it either gave up or had its fill of me and scurried off into the trees. In the distance, I heard the howling of wolves again. Before leaving, I patted the trunk of the tree that had protected us and gave it my thanks.

The next week, I returned to the Great Pulha Woodlands, determined to find something worth hunting this time. I came across a great silver elk who had injured its leg and was able to finish it off.

Was it all just a coincidence? No, there was no way. The adult grand wolves must have been trying to return the favor of saving their child. This was a more interesting way of thinking about it anyway. It made it feel like the debt between us had been fully paid off.

The jerky I made from the deer's meat made an excellent accompaniment to Master Damned Dwarf's phenomenal alcohol.



High elves had effectively ageless bodies, making it nearly impossible to tell how old we were from appearance alone. Dwarves were similar, with the thick beards they grew both young and old. So when I heard the news, I was so shocked I felt like my jaw was going to drop off my gaping face.

Ten years had passed since I started learning under Master Damned Dwarf. A letter arrived from his home in the dwarven nation, requesting he get married and start a family. He had earned plenty of fame, not just in Vistcourt, but in the entire nation of Ludoria. His family had decided it was time for him to return home after so much time practicing his craft in human territory.

Master Damned Dwarf would soon be turning ninety. But dwarves lived about three to five times as long as humans did, roughly two to three hundred years. In human terms, he was only in his late twenties or early thirties.

That revelation shocked me to the core. With his incredible skill in blacksmithing and confident air of gravitas, I was sure he was much older. And the idea of him getting married seemed so out of place that I couldn't help but burst out laughing, knowing full well how rude it was. Of course, the moment I did, he punched me. Hard.

Still, I felt like it was good timing. In the ten years I had spent here, Master Damned Dwarf had taken on a number of human apprentices. Not all of them had proved successful, but he had still turned out a good number of skilled smiths who eventually managed to go independent. But these humans asking to be taken on as an apprentice to a dwarf had already learned blacksmithing somewhere else, and were effectively already professionals. The idea of someone with no experience at all asking to be taught by a dwarf was the height of arrogance, or so it was said within the blacksmithing world.

I, of course, had no idea. The humans that came to learn after I did were initially appalled at my presence, but Master Damned Dwarf himself had accepted me, so we still managed to get along.

Either way, even if Master Damned Dwarf left Vistcourt behind, the city would hardly be wanting for blacksmiths. The seed he had planted here had long since grown into a splendid tree.

And although it was a little sad, I felt it was good timing for me as well. The growth of Vistcourt's blacksmithing community wasn't the only thing that had changed during these past ten years. The strongest group of adventurers in the city, the seven-star team White Lake, had disbanded three years ago. Clayas, the team's warrior, and Martena, the team's priestess, had gotten married and started having children.

In a physical sense, the prime of a human's life was incredibly short. Before their physical decline led to a fatal mistake, these former adventurers decided it was best for them to retire and begin working on raising the next generation. I felt like they had made the right choice.

As an elf whose body wouldn't decline until much later, Airena had decided she hadn't yet had her fill of adventuring, and so she'd left in search of new companions. Maybe she had hoped I would go with her, but she knew I wouldn't be willing to throw away my career in blacksmithing and so left on her own with a smile, making sure to give me so much advice about how to live my daily life that one could have mistaken her for my mother.

The man that had been guarding the gate when I first arrived in the city ten years ago, Rodna, had risen to the rank of commander in the city guard. Though he no longer found himself guarding the city gates, the city's trust in him didn't fade in the least. Even now, we occasionally went out to that same restaurant for food and drinks together.

The young man I had met in the blacksmithing shop, Astre, had ended up becoming a great warrior. He even managed to get a five-star rank. He was still a far cry from the unreasonable standard set by White Lake, but his life as an adventurer was already more than successful.

For a high elf like me, ten years was hardly any time at all. But these past ten

years had felt far, far denser than the hundred and fifty before them. And most of that was all thanks to Master Damned Dwarf, who had been willing to take on a damned elf like me as his apprentice.

“So I’ll be heading back to dwarven lands. What about you?” The man whom I owed everything to asked me.

Indeed, what *was* I going to do? There were plenty of things I had taken an interest in.

“Swordsmanship...and maybe magic? I’m thinking of joining a school for one of those in the capital. Luckily, I’ve managed to save quite a bit of money.”

I had managed to save quite a bit after ten years from working as a blacksmith...but for some reason, even after I moved out of the inn and got my own house, Airenna still felt worried enough about me that she ended up moving in with me. She had left me a tremendous amount of money, calling it “rent.” I was set, able to wholly focus on learning without having to worry about work to support myself.

“Ha! Even with the spirits at your beck and call, you still want magic, huh? You’re as weird as ever. But that’s fine. No matter what you decide to do, you’ll still be my best student and a close friend, you da—Acer.”

He looked away, embarrassed. It was such a bizarre sight, it made me want to laugh. But I didn’t.

There are times when happiness can be so overwhelming that instead of smiling, you start to cry. I’d never known that feeling until, for the first time in ten years, he called me by my name. It was the first time the word “Acer” had felt like a real name for me.

“Aha ha ha... That doesn’t fit you at all. As an elf...as a high elf, I’ll never be allowed into a dwarven country, but I’ll never forget you as my teacher and my friend, Oswald.” Though my voice was shaking, I held out my right hand, which Oswald grabbed in his in a powerful handshake.

And then he smiled. “That’s not like you at all either. The best part about you is that you’re mad enough to go wherever you want without a moment’s hesitation. But you were a high elf, huh?” With a laugh, he dropped my hand

and lightly smacked me in the chest with his fist.



Ow.

For some reason, as painful as it was, it felt like a kind, pleasant pain. We wouldn't be able to talk like this for much longer.

"Fine then," he said without dropping his smile. "Wait fifty years. After that, come on down to our country. I'll become the best smith there, take the throne for myself, and invite you elves to come play. When that happens, you come proudly declaring you were my student."

The most important thing among dwarves was skill in blacksmithing. It brought respect from others, conferred social status, and could earn one anything. Surprisingly, that included even the rulership of the country. So, he was saying I was a close friend and the number one student of the future king of the dwarves.

Ah, what a great honor that would be.

"Then I'll keep working so that my skills don't get rusty...no, so that I'll manage to get even a little better."

He responded to my words with a nod. Then one month later, he left to return to the dwarven country.

One of Oswald's apprentices inherited the blacksmithing shop from him. I applied to the blacksmithing guild and received my license as a master blacksmith. That was a qualification recognized not just in Ludoria but in the surrounding nations as well, proof to all of them that I was a first-rate blacksmith.

The guild recognizing an elf like myself must have caused no small amount of backlash from the dwarves who greatly influenced it. But my master used his skill, his words, and his fists to silence the opposition and get me that license. To be honest, it was my pride.

In the following weeks, I borrowed the forge in Oswald's old blacksmithing shop to start working on my grand wolf fang knife, bit by bit, as carefully as possible. When the knife was finished, I hung it at my hip and left the city of Vistcourt behind. For the first time in a long while, I pulled from my bag one of the apuas, which hadn't even started to spoil in the ten years since I picked

them, and took a bite.

By carriage, it would take about ten days to reach the capital. On foot, it would take even longer. But with my heart swelling with pride after the completion of my masterwork of ten years, I decided to walk.

Chapter 2 — The High Elf and the Sword Princess

Wolfir, the capital city of Ludoria, was ten days away from Vistcourt by carriage. Vistcourt, just beyond the Great Pulha Woodlands, stood on the western edge of Ludoria. The city of Garalate I had visited earlier was in the northern reaches of the kingdom, while Wolfir was at the center. I didn't know the exact geography, but if a carriage could travel 80 to a 100 kilometers in a day, that would make the Kingdom of Ludoria around 1500 to 2000 kilometers across. It was a very rough calculation, but even if it wasn't especially large for a nation, it was still pretty big.

As such, though perhaps it was obvious, the capital at the center of it all was incomparably prosperous compared to Vistcourt. It had multiple layers of walls around it, which seemed a bit unnecessary to me given its position at the center of the kingdom. If someone really managed to launch an attack on the capital, I felt like the country would be ruined whether they managed to protect the city itself or not. But that was none of my concern.

Citizens of the capital lived inside the walls, while those too poor to afford citizenship had built up a slum outside of them. Being situated around the capital of the kingdom, the slums of Wolfir were the largest in the country. Closer to the city gates, they were reasonably safe, but as one headed deeper into them, widespread crime turned it into a lawless area. Though I couldn't say they didn't interest me, I had another objective at the moment. I could step into danger once I had grown accustomed to the capital and grown bored of its safety.

Just like any other city in the kingdom, one had to pay a toll to make it in through the gates. The price was the same: twenty coppers if you had proof of identity, one silver otherwise. I had spent long enough living in Vistcourt that they had granted me citizenship. Of course that was only in Vistcourt itself, but it gave me enough proof of identity to pass through the gates here at the lower rate. On top of that, the master blacksmith's license I had been given by Oswald was also excellent proof of identity.

In truth, either one would be sufficient to get me into the city. I planned to live in the capital for a while, so with no intention of working as a blacksmith anytime soon, I used my identity as a citizen of Vistcourt for tax purposes. But I would eventually feel the need to visit a forge at some point, so instead of hiding my blacksmithing license and causing problems later, I added it to the application as well. Once I wrote out my reasons for coming to the capital, my application to enter the city was complete.

After looking over the papers and checking my face three times, the guard chuckled. “An elf who lives in the city and works as a blacksmith, come here to learn swordsmanship and magic? Sorry, but you seem like quite a strange man. Ah, a strange elf, I should say?”

Though he laughed at me, I didn’t sense any ill intent or hostility from him, so it didn’t bother me. But I also didn’t feel like it was appropriate for him to call me that. I had grown accustomed to being called strange for so long, but as a merchant told me during my time as a blacksmith, dutiful guards brought peace of mind to a healthy city, but guards accepting bribes would cause unrest among citizens. The behavior of a city’s guards was as a mirror, reflecting the rule of the lord and the heart of its people.

From that perspective, this guard’s attitude indicated a fantastic place to live. But as friendly as he was being, I could tell he was wary of me and the others around. In a way, that was proof that he *needed* to be on guard against something. It could have been for any number of reasons. Perhaps it was because of the slums nearby, or people trying to smuggle illicit goods into the city, or because of something dangerous happening within the city itself. I had no way of knowing, so I felt it would be best to stay on guard myself.

“Welcome to Wolfir, capital of Ludoria.” Returning my identification, the guard smiled at me. My previous conjectures aside, he seemed like a good person.

My first objective in these crowded streets was finding a place to stay. No matter what I intended to do in the city, I would need a place to sleep. And importantly, in a city where I didn’t know left from right, it would be best to avoid staying somewhere too cheap. Somewhere more expensive would be the safer choice, at least for now.

The more a place charged for a room, the better service they would have to offer. Of course, that included the quality of furnishings in the rooms and the food that they served, but most importantly it also included a degree of safety and security. Though it wasn't a given, and one had to review the anti-crime measures and attitude of the staff individually, there was a far better chance of staying safe at an expensive inn than a cheap one. I had finally come to understand why Airena had been so persistent in keeping me somewhere expensive when I'd first emerged from the forest.

And besides, even after I'd picked a place to stay for the time being, I could still change my mind and move somewhere else if I found one that was safer, cheaper, or with better service. Besides, I'd want to live as close as possible to whatever school of magic or swordsmanship I joined. So once I had made a final decision as to how I would spend my time in the capital, I would need to look for a new place to stay anyway.

But as I wandered the streets in search of an inn, I found my heart captured by someone I saw. It was a street performer. Or rather, a swordswoman.

Though I couldn't say the sword in her hands was dull, I also couldn't call it a particularly good piece. However, after concentrating for a few moments, the swordswoman swung the sword horizontally, neatly slicing a fruit sitting on a pedestal in front of her.

It looked totally unbelievable to me. From my experience as a blacksmith, I could tell that sword would crudely smash its way through the fruit at best. At worst, it would strike like a hammer without actually cutting at all. It would be no different from hitting it with a baseball bat.

And yet, her sword cut neatly through it.



My instinct was to get closer and inspect the sword, but I barely managed to hold myself back. Even at this distance, there was no way I would misjudge the weapon. But it was improper of me to doubt her skills after what I had just seen. So pulling out a silver, I walked up to her. She had shown me something impressive, so I gave it to her as a tip. She took a moment to stare wide-eyed at the shining coin before giving me a deep bow.

Perhaps her show was actually much more plain than I had imagined, as no one else seemed interested in giving her anything, but I found satisfaction in it. On my first day in the capital, I was able to see some fantastic swordplay. The city must have been overflowing with master swordsmen, so there was no doubt I'd be able to learn here.

My heart raced with excitement. I had originally thought I would lean toward magic at first, but once I found a place to stay, I would probably go find a school of swordsmanship instead.

With that on my mind, I left the swordswoman behind.



A brief investigation into swordsmanship in the capital turned up three large schools, collectively called the Three Great Schools. Apparently it had been Four Great Schools until a short time ago, when one of them had fallen to ruin and stopped accepting students.

Of the remaining three, one taught the style of swordsmanship used by the country's chivalry, the Royal Ludoria Swordsmanship School. Having the name of the kingdom attached to it made it the most popular among the great three by far, attracting the children of knights and nobles. It was on a different level than the other styles taught in the city. As the official school endorsed by Ludoria's chivalry, it was a very orthodox style, using a sword and shield to fight with a good balance between offense and defense. They also taught use of the spear and bow, so if one were to learn at the capital, almost anyone would recommend the Royal School. In other words, it was painfully ordinary and not the least bit interesting, and so out of the question for me.

The next option was the Rodran Greatsword Style, the school where Clayas of White Lake had learned to fight. As its name suggested, it focused on powerful

techniques using a two-handed greatsword to smash apart one's enemies. It also taught unarmed martial arts, so its students were quite skilled in techniques like body blows and knee kicks. As for defense, beyond training the agility needed to avoid enemy attacks, they were also trained to block attacks with the small but sturdy armor they wore on their shoulders, elbows, and other critical spots.

The last of the Three Great Schools was the Grend School of Swordsmanship. Similar to the Royal Ludoria Style, the Grend Style used a sword and shield. But while the Royal School taught a balance of attack and defense, the Grend Style put all of its emphasis on defense. Though it was called a school of swordsmanship, it was really more about learning to use a shield. The style revolved around striking with the shield, deflecting the enemy's weapon, and then delivering a single stab with a sword once their defense was broken. I didn't feel like that style of fighting matched my personality, so I ruled that option out as well.

So if I was going to pick one of the three, the Rodran Style seemed the most interesting. There were certainly other schools in the capital, but I figured any school that had taught Clayas couldn't be a bad choice. Based on that, I'd settle for the school of the Rodran Greatsword Style.

However...

Maybe my luck was just bad. Maybe if I hadn't seen the swordswoman performing the day before, I would have been able to sign up without hesitation. But with her display fresh in my mind, while I could see the power and strength behind the swordsmanship of the students and teachers of Rodran, I couldn't find any beauty in it. And really, if I was interested in learning the Rodran Style, I'd be better off returning to Vistcourt and learning from Clayas. Never mind the students, even the instructors didn't seem to have the skill to match him.

So maybe my luck was better than I thought. If I hadn't seen that woman's swordsmanship, I might have ended up joining the Rodran School without much thought. But still, I was struck with quite the dilemma. That swordswoman's performance had become the standard I judged the other schools by.

To be honest, being able to slice a fruit well wasn't especially meaningful. Before she had done so, she spent a rather long time focusing. That was a huge opening in battle and would never be possible in an actual combat situation. So while beautiful, it wasn't a particularly practical way of fighting.

But I still wanted to try it. What can I say?

There was only one thing for me to do. Leaving the Rodran School behind, I headed back to the street where I had found the swordswoman performing the day before. When I arrived, she was nowhere to be seen, so I sat down and waited. In the end she never arrived, so I came back the next day and waited again. I asked some of the other street performers I had tipped, who told me she came to put on her show once every few days. As incredible as her technique was, it lacked the flashiness of other street performances, so she rarely made much money. But even so, for about a year she had been regularly coming to do her performance.

I continued to wait, until at last she appeared again.

"Um, excuse me, sir elf. I noticed you have been sitting here for a time. Is something wrong? I believe I've seen you here before..."

It seemed she remembered me. Maybe it was just because an elf outside the forest stood out so much, but I was grateful for that in this case. Standing up, I looked at the swordswoman and took a deep breath. Once again, the battle was starting.

"When I saw your swordsmanship before, I fell in love with it. Please teach me. I want to learn to use a sword like that," I said, bowing my head. Of course, I didn't mean I wanted to learn to use a blunt, poor-quality sword like the one she wielded. I was just interested in the techniques she showed. If I could get that sword off her, I'd take it to a blacksmith, melt it down, and remake it from scratch.

"Uh, my apologies, but..."

"I am prepared to pay you for it. I'll also do any other work you need me to do. Please teach me!" As she tried to refuse, I interrupted her and bowed deeper. The moment I said I had fallen in love with her swordsmanship, a bright smile flitted across her face. So if she was planning on turning me down as a

student, there must have been some other underlying reason. But that reason was hers alone, so I couldn't know anything about it, and so I didn't much care.

All I wanted was to learn swordsmanship from her. If she had some reason to turn me down, I'd need to kick that reason out of my way. I absolutely would not give up. This was a battle, where retreating a single step meant defeat.

With her refusal crushed by my interruption, she stood mouth agape, clearly at a loss. In short, she had retreated a step. I was definitely going to win this fight.

"I don't know the name of your style of swordsmanship, but I want to be able to use a sword like you do." I stepped forward to take the space she had retreated from.

Indecision ruled her features as she took a long moment to think. "Very well... Let us speak of this at my dojo. I am sure you will change your mind after seeing it." Though the look of indecision never left her face, she finally relented.

If Master Damned Dwarf, if Oswald had been here, he doubtless would be sharing a look of sympathy with her. I was having the time of my life.

And so we left the street behind and headed back to her school, where I would begin to learn swordsmanship.



The place she brought me to was large but rather run-down...no, that would be a massive understatement. It was little more than a ruin. It had clearly been intentionally destroyed by a large number of people. The door was smashed, the roof full of holes to let in all kinds of wind and rain, and the support beams holding it up were so rotted they would likely collapse at any moment. Only the training room itself was in such disrepair, though. The dwelling attached to it was in perfectly ordinary condition.

"This was once the dojo of one of the Four Great Schools, the Yosogi School," she said, sad eyes looking over the ruins. It seemed she thought that was enough for me to guess her circumstances.

Of course, I could. I had heard a little about the Yosogi School when looking into the other schools of swordsmanship in the capital. The head of the school

had lost a match against a member of the Rodran School. Though they fought with blunted practice blades, he had been struck in an unfortunate spot and ended up dying. Even if the blade had no edge, taking a full-strength hit from a greatsword could still be lethal.

That was the trigger for the Yosogi School's descent. With their master dead, the high-level students had attacked the Rodran School to get revenge, and they had been wiped out in turn. Though they should have been on equal footing, the leaderless Yosogi students had lost all sense of unity and had fallen into infighting, and so they were easily crushed by the waiting Rodran School.

As retribution for the assault, the Rodran School came and destroyed the Yosogi School's dojo.

"The students that had not participated in the attack on the Rodran School then fled, afraid that retribution would come for them too," she explained. "I was just a child at the time, so my mother and I were spared, and they did not touch our home, but..."

The Yosogi School was gone.

I see.

Looking closer, I realized she was still rather young.

"I developed this style on my own, using what my father taught me when I was a child," she explained. "It does not even hold a candle to the true Yosogi Style. The best I can do is put on a performance. No, I cannot say I am even skilled enough to do *that* well. The Yosogi School has long been dead." Her voice overflowed with bitterness. She couldn't accept it, but she couldn't do anything about it. Every word had to be squeezed out painfully, each dripping with regret. "Learning such useless swordsmanship from me is no compensation for making an enemy of the Rodran School. You must understand that, so I ask that you withdraw your request." She no doubt was trying to ward me off for my own benefit.

But she had underestimated me. The Yosogi School was dead? So what? I'd make an enemy of the Rodran School? Who cares?

"That's fine. I'm not interested in learning the old Yosogi Style. I want to learn

from you. And I've been to the Rodran School. I'm not worried about what swordsmen like them could do at all."

I was interested in *her* swordsmanship, the style she had developed on her own. I didn't care how it compared to the old style. And while I might be worried about someone on Clayas's level, if anyone like those I had seen at the Rodran School came to harass us, it would only take a word for the wind spirits to send them running home naked. Not that I was particularly interested in seeing that.

"Of course, I'm interested in your swordsmanship, not your actual sword. Speaking of which, I really don't think that sword matches your skill. I'd like to fix it for you. Could I borrow it for a week or so?" As she stared back at me in shock, I pressed her further.

I had no intention of backing down. But I guess if I was going to learn here, we'd have to start by fixing this room she called a dojo. The money wouldn't be an issue, but finding a trustworthy carpenter to do the work would be the real challenge. That said, if it was just the two of us, we wouldn't need such a large building to train. We could probably wait until we found the right person to do the work.

I really wanted to do something about her sword, though. I'd also need to make a sword for myself as well. With my master blacksmith license, it couldn't be that hard to find a forge I could borrow.

I finally saw something change in her eyes. Her resignation, her desire to keep me from getting wrapped up in her family's trouble, was replaced by utter confusion.

"Um, who exactly are you...?"

I might have pushed her a bit too far all at once. It finally occurred to me that I hadn't even introduced myself yet.

"I'm Acer, a high elf. In the Forest Depths, they called me the Child of the Maple. My specialties are archery and using the power of the spirits. I also spent ten years learning blacksmithing from a dwarf, so I have my master blacksmith's license..." So I took the chance to introduce myself properly. Watching her grow steadily more surprised at every word was rather amusing.

“And I’m your student. The first student of the New Yosogi Style, huh? That would be great.”

I held my right hand out to her. She stared back at me bewildered, fear and joy a storm across her features. But in the end, she finally admitted defeat and took my hand in hers. I had a new master, my first step on the road to becoming a swordsman.



That day, I left the inn I had been using behind and moved into the guest room in this Kaeha Yosogi’s house. I wasn’t really all that fond of the idea, but seeing how her eyes sparkled when she said it was the master’s duty to look after her students, I couldn’t refuse her. Though she was a rather guarded person, once you broke the ice, she seemed to warm up quickly to you.

My suspicion was that when she was a child, some of the high-level students of the dojo stayed overnight with them, and so she thought it was normal for students to live with their teachers. I felt like I would need to rid her of that notion before the dojo was repaired and she began taking on new students.

Kaeha’s mother, who had been waiting for her at the house, seemed a little shocked when Kaeha brought me there. I came to learn that her mother suffered from tuberculosis. She had never been particularly healthy, but when she lost her husband and the dojo was destroyed, she was forced into a frugal lifestyle of slowly eating away their savings, which led to her condition worsening. Kaeha had been performing on the street to try and make money to pay for her mother’s medicine. Apparently that medicine came from herbs found in the forest, so I decided from now on I would go collect them myself.

As a high elf, I knew medicinal herbs like the back of my hand. Even finding them was no challenge at all, as the trees were happy to point me in the right direction. For the moment, I ground up some apua fruit and had her drink it. The eternally fresh apua would help invigorate the body. I imagined it would be a lot more effective than some cheap medicine.

I also made sure to write a letter back to Vistcourt. Of course, the recipient was White Lake’s own Clayas. As a seven-star adventurer, he was a legendary figure in the school of the Rodran Greatsword Style. I asked him to warn the

Rodran School not to interfere with us. We also didn't want to cause them any undue concern while rebuilding the Yosogi School.

I didn't have any reason to see the Rodran School as an enemy. If they tried to meddle with us I would respond accordingly, but I hoped we could avoid coming into conflict in the first place. Kaeha and her mother obviously had their own feelings about them, but I doubted they were interested in prolonging the dispute either.

The next day, I paid a visit to the local blacksmithing guild to find a forge I could borrow. In deference to my master's license, the staff there immediately set to work finding a place and materials for me. They had plenty of other work they wanted me to do, but my top priority was fixing my new master's sword and making one for myself. I wouldn't mind taking on some jobs after that, though. I certainly didn't want my skills as a blacksmith to grow rusty.

On my way home, I stopped at some stores to buy some daily essentials for myself and glean what information I could from the store clerks and owners. The main thing I was interested in was finding out what kind of relationship existed between the old Yosogi School and the other major schools in the capital, the Royal Ludoria Swordsmanship School and the Grend School. Clayas might have been able to help me deal with the Rodran School, but I didn't know anything about the others.

Other schools might try and crush the Yosogi School again to make a name for themselves, and the Three Great Schools might find the return of their old rival a nuisance. With no clue what might happen, gathering what information I could was vital.

On the other hand, an elf like me asking questions would spread the news like wildfire. The Yosogi School had taken an elf as a student. The school was being supported by the elves. By spreading that news around, I could redirect the actions of anyone who wanted to harm the Yosogi School. In other words, I was using myself like a light trap for mosquitoes.

If something were to happen to Kaeha or her mother, my own training would suffer. As my teacher, Kaeha was of course important, but if something

happened to her mother, Kaeha wouldn't be in a position to teach me either. So I would have to protect the two of them. Whether that was an appropriate role for a student like me to take or not, it was what I wanted to do, so I would protect them for my own sake.

The problem was that, with how busy this was making me, it didn't look like I'd be able to learn magic at the same time. That was kind of unavoidable, though. I could learn magic whenever, but Kaeha's Yosogi Style of swordsmanship would soon disappear if left to its own devices. On top of that, I was more interested in swordsmanship than in magic right now. So if it took ten or twenty years for things to calm down, or for me to be confident enough in my swordsmanship that I could move on to something else, that didn't especially bother me.

On the way home, the spirits of the wind whispered a warning in my ear. Turning around, I stared at a seedy-looking man making his way toward me. The likely pickpocket gave an awkward, ashamed smile before scurrying away.

It seemed the capital wasn't quite as safe as Vistcourt. All kinds of people made their way to the Kingdom of Ludoria, and among them some inevitably fell through the cracks, unable to keep up with life's struggles. There was no small number of people who learned to steal to survive.

Being so close to the Great Pulha Woodlands, Vistcourt was full of adventurers. And while not all of them were so refined and proper, most of them were warm and friendly. But different environments bred different people.

I chewed on that thought as I made my way through the streets of the capital.



Sitting in front of the forge the blacksmithing guild had provided me, I spoke with the dancing fire spirits inside as I focused myself. They were quite energetic. Today, or rather for the next few days, I would work on fixing Kaeha's sword. I would then try to make some more swords with the same balance, but no blades, to use as practice weapons.

Kaeha said she had developed her current style of swordsmanship herself

based on what she had learned from the Yosogi School as a child. It wasn't too hard to guess how she would practice based on her circumstances. All alone, she wouldn't have much she could do but practice swings and forms. She had yet to teach me anything, and I had only heard what the Yosogi Style was like in brief, but I was pretty confident in my guess.

It was easy to tell that Kaeha used this sword for all of her practice. Calling it her partner in learning swordsmanship was no exaggeration. But if she wanted to rebuild the Yosogi School, she would need to use proper equipment for training, so I decided to make a number of practice swords for her.

The sword she used was a single-bladed straight sword, a pretty rare sight around this area, similar to a falchion or grosse messer. The Yosogi Style had come to Ludoria from foreign lands and originally used a slightly different kind of sword, likely something closer to a katana. However, katanas were not easily obtainable in Ludoria, so they had changed to practicing with a sword like this.

I had learned blacksmithing from a true master, so I had learned how to make katanas, but if I made something like that and handed it to Kaeha, it would probably just confuse her. If she took an interest in it later, I could make one for her, or I could start using one myself. But for now, my objective was to improve the quality of her own sword without changing its weight or balance.

I woke up early and, after a breakfast provided by Kaeha's mother, headed out into the forest. The herbs that would help her lungs didn't keep long, so I would need to collect them every day. However, as close as the forest was to the capital, it wasn't so close that you could easily walk there. Even leaving early in the morning, I wouldn't make it back until the afternoon.

After grabbing some food from street stalls for lunch, on my way back I made a beeline for the forge. I would work on the steel until nightfall, then return to Kaeha's house for dinner and a bath. I would then use the herbs I had collected to make a day's worth of medicine for her mother. Then it was sleep, preparing myself for another day of looking in the forest.

My days were filled perfectly, with no time for learning the sword at all. Of course, that was all just temporary. Once I had finished the swords, I would only

visit the forge once or twice a week. And once Kaeha's mother recovered, I wouldn't need to go hunting for medicine anymore.

I felt bad for Kaeha since she had been so excited to have a student, and I felt worse seeing how hard she was working on coming up with a plan to train me. But I would need her to wait a little longer. Well, I was sure she'd be ecstatic to have her sword fixed, so doing that first should buy me a little time.

I would be done with all the smithing in a few weeks, and between the medicine and apuas I gave her, Kaeha's mother's condition was also improving. I figured in two or three months I would be able to quit collecting herbs. She was a sickly person in general, so we would still have to watch out for her, but her coughing had stopped and her complexion was already improving, so it seemed the sickness in her lungs was healing.

Kaeha and her mother were both quite thankful and so treated me quite well. Though we hadn't even started training yet, the problems we faced were being tackled one by one, so we were still progressing at a good pace.

Around the time I finished making the swords, I received a letter from Vistcourt. It was a reply from Clayas.

There were two main ways to send long-distance letters in Ludoria. The first was to entrust the letters to a merchant you were familiar with. The second was to hire adventurers to deliver it.

Even merchants that maintained permanent stores often traveled to restock their wares. For example, if a store sold wheat to its local area, they would negotiate with the large storehouses that bought and stored wheat from the surrounding villages to secure their own supply. So even if they dealt in wheat, for a small price, they would eventually be able to deliver letters to the surrounding cities. Replies to your letter would also make their way to the same store through the organizations running the storehouses.

However, letters sent in this way were given to the village chief who would then bring them to the correct recipients, so it wasn't a great method of communication if secrecy or privacy were needed. Even if the letters were sealed, the village chief could claim the right to inspect any correspondence and

open them. So for a letter that needed to be delivered privately or quickly, the expensive option of hiring adventurers to deliver it was preferred.

The adventurer's guild would take letters and send them out with adventurers headed to that city, who would stay to do work there. Alternatively, if you could spare the additional expense, you could request a specific person to courier the letter for you from start to finish. Such was the ideal way of sending letters if you needed them delivered into the hands of only the proper recipient, or within a strict time frame.

The courier that brought Clayas's reply was an adventurer I knew from Vistcourt. In other words, Clayas had taken the expensive option of picking a specific person to carry the letter for him.

After thanking the courier for bringing the letter, I asked about the situation in Vistcourt and gave him some money to buy souvenirs for his return trip. I was sure Clayas had paid him to bring the letter here, but the job had forced him to come all the way out to the capital, so I felt that was the least I could do.

In Clayas's letter, he informed me that he would discourage the Rodran School from bothering us, so if there were any problems, I should contact him before bringing down the school myself. He said he would be sending them a letter immediately, but once work allowed, he would visit the school himself to give them a personal warning, likely in about half a year. He was looking forward to meeting with me then.

Hmph...

Who did he think I was? I wouldn't wipe out an entire school just because I was angry with them. I supposed if things escalated that might change, but in that case, I wouldn't have the time to send a letter, so it was really an impossible request.

But Clayas is going to visit the school personally, huh?

Though he had retired from adventuring, he still worked with adventurers, teaching swordsmanship at the adventurer's guild. He was likely curious as to my living situation.

But Clayas was a swordsman of the Rodran Greatsword Style. I couldn't help

but worry whether it was okay for him to meet Kaeha and her mother. The incident between the two schools had happened when Clayas was already living in Vistcourt, so he hadn't been involved in it at all. But logic and emotion followed different tracks, so I was concerned whether Kaeha and her mother would accept him or not.

Though of a different school, Clayas was a master swordsman. If he and Kaeha got along, that would be of great benefit to her, but...

Worrying about all this myself would get me nowhere. When he came, I would tell them he was here to keep the Rodran School from bothering us. They could decide for themselves whether they wanted to meet or not after that. At worst, I could just take a room at the same inn Clayas would stay at.

When it came to my own relationships, I could be pretty forceful, but relationships between others were much more delicate issues. It was times like this that I understood a little of why elves and high elves had such disdain for outsiders.

Just a little, though. When I thought back to the smile Kaeha had when I first returned her repaired sword, how she had immediately begun cutting all sorts of things with childish delight, I couldn't help but want to keep living with people. Her smile was adorable.



At long last, my training in swordsmanship finally began. As I had expected, it would be pretty boring to watch. After all, the fundamentals were just swinging a sword. However, with my teacher doing the exact same movements beside me, I found it interesting nonetheless.

I would compare how I moved to how she moved and, little by little, make corrections to my form. She said nothing, silently swinging her sword at my side. She had likely never had to teach anyone before, so she didn't really know what to say to someone who had no experience. So for now, she just swung her sword and told me to copy her. Thinking back to the lessons she had learned as a child, after dealing with all the technical details in her head, she just put the final result on display and had me try to replicate it.

That was almost certainly a terrible way to teach someone who had absolutely no experience. If you didn't explain thoroughly and start right at the beginning, they wouldn't have any idea what the point of the practice was.

But this way of doing it meshed quite well with me. The endless repetition of the same movements, burning the movements into my muscles until they became second nature, was the same way I'd learned to use my bow in the Forest Depths. I had also learned how to compare myself to my teacher and correct myself accordingly from my time learning blacksmithing. I could swing the sword, think about what I'd done, and make corrections for the next time. Slowly, I was able to combine all the steps together into a single action.

It wasn't long before I learned that I couldn't swing a sword the same way she did just by mimicking her movements. A human woman was too different from a male high elf. The lengths of our limbs, the shapes of our pelvises, the movement of our elbows and knees, and of course the way our bodies built muscle were all different.

Mimicking her movements wouldn't create the same result. In particular, she had more weight around her chest than I did. So instead of just copying her movements, I would need to find out how to move in my own way that could get the same results.

Based on the use of the katana, the Yosogi Style used primarily two-handed sword techniques. Some of the forms were one-handed though, and they were

quite difficult. Despite being a high elf, thanks to my experience as a blacksmith I had quite a bit more muscle than Kaeha, but even so she was able to swing one-handed easily and stop crisply. I had difficulty keeping my sword on track when I swung with one hand, and would always waver when I came to a stop. I thought there must be some sort of trick to it. I continued to watch what she did, compared it to the way I was swinging, and repeated endlessly.

We continued training together like that, and in what felt like no time at all, half a year had passed and Clayas had arrived in the capital.

Before visiting the Rodran School, he came to see me, saw the ruined Yosogi dojo himself, and heard Kaeha and her mother's side of the story. That must have been his way of showing that he was here as my friend and ally, not as a member of the Rodran School. He never showed anything less than full respect for the Yosogi School in his conversations with Kaeha and her mother.

I had only ever thought of Clayas as just a strong adventurer, but to Kaeha and her mother, he was like a pure and noble warrior. Though there had been plenty of misgivings before meeting him, by the time they had finished talking, they had completely opened up to him.

Kaeha especially was dying to hear more from someone who was clearly her superior in swordsmanship, so in the end he canceled his reservation at an inn and stayed the night with us. In short, he was treated exactly like I was.

Kaeha likely lacked confidence in her own abilities, skills she had acquired only from constant practice of swinging and forms. Most of what she asked him was about practical tactics and training methods. Clayas seemed to catch on, so rather than tell her about the Rodran School's way of doing things, he explained his own personal methods of training.

Though he was a student of the Rodran School, he had been an adventurer for so long, he rarely had a partner for his training. Most of his practice had to be done alone. On the other hand, he had a wealth of experience in combat against monsters and bandits, which informed where his training was lacking. That experience taught him how he needed to train to compensate for his weaknesses and grow as a swordsman. The evidence of his success was his

place as the sole frontline member of a seven-star adventuring team, marking him as a master.

“So if you feel like your swordsmanship is lacking something practical for actual combat...the best way to fix that is to experience combat. Of course, that was just my experience. I can’t say it will work for anyone.” As he explained that to Kaeha, Clayas glanced over at me, checking for my response.

I could tell what he was thinking. I didn’t like the answer he had come to, but at some point it might be inevitable. If Kaeha didn’t perfect her own swordsmanship, I would never be able to perfect mine. I had no complaints about the beauty of her current style, but if she couldn’t be confident in it, she wouldn’t be able to teach it well either.

“I recommend you spend three years...well, even one or two years as an adventurer if possible. After all, you’ve got the strongest guy I know with you.”

The reason Clayas referred to me as the “strongest” guy he knew, and not the most reliable, was obvious. The most reliable people he knew were clearly Airen and Martena, his companions in White Lake. Even if he had retired from adventuring, that would never change.

Kaeha looked at me in surprise, to which I could only look away in embarrassment. I did tell her I was skilled with a bow and in using the spirits when we first met, but it seemed she never guessed I was on a level to be praised by someone like Clayas.

But Clayas and I had never gone adventuring together, so his assessment of me wasn’t a particularly informed one anyway. The incident with the enraged water spirit seemed to have left quite an impression on him. Even so, I felt like he was overestimating me. If he attacked me at this range, I’d be helpless to stop him from splitting me in two. At longer ranges that would change, but it was a far cry from the claims he was making about my strength.

But that aside, there was a significant problem standing between Kaeha and adventuring experience. If she left to work as an adventurer, especially by hunting monsters or dispatching bandits, she would have to leave her mother home alone. Even if her mother’s condition was improving, she was still weak enough that she couldn’t be left alone for any extended amount of time.

The next day, before Clayas left to visit the Rodran School, Kaeha asked him to spar with her. Clayas accepted, so they faced off...and Kaeha had been utterly helpless against him.

Clayas only had to take a stance against her. She had no idea how to attack through it. Having only ever practiced swings and forms, she had no idea how to break an opponent's guard, nor did she have the readiness to do so. Her training was enough for her to understand that his guard had no openings, but that knowledge itself left her unable to see a way through it, paralyzing her. Completely powerless, forced to face her own failure, she had given in to despair and surrendered.

Clayas looked to her, then to me, then left the Yosogi dojo. The wound he left behind was deep. But if one couldn't deal with such an injury, they could never survive as a swordsman. Clayas had likely been thinking that when he forced Kaeha to face her own weakness.

I figured I'd have to do something. I mean, what a guy he was to do something like that. But really, I owed him a thank you. Kaeha needed an opponent who far outclassed her to reveal that blind spot. I couldn't think of anyone out there but Clayas who could teach her that lesson without completely breaking her spirit.

But I felt like he was still underestimating her. After all, this was the woman I had chosen as my master.



"What am I supposed to do, Acer?" Kaeha asked later that afternoon while training with her sword again. The question brought a smile to my face as I stood beside her, practicing the same movements.

Her voice sounded weak and frail. She had challenged Clayas to a sparring match but was unable to so much as make a move before accepting defeat. It was a one-sided display, not a contest of comparable strength. She was overwhelmed with self-loathing for being totally unable to act. Her pride, as a swordswoman and as my teacher, had been driven into the ground...but it hadn't been destroyed.

“I feel like you already know the answer to that,” I replied. “You’re already out here swinging a sword again, aren’t you? You definitely still have a future.”

Even a few short hours after her failure, she was back to practicing. She had lost her father, her dojo had been destroyed, the students had fled, and her mother had grown sick. But despite it all, she was still here, swinging that sword. There was no way she didn’t have a future.

At the very least, she wasn’t alone. Without even a year of practice under my belt, perhaps I couldn’t be considered a swordsman. Even so, I was here with her. That was clear progress.

Today, she had learned that she was lacking something. She should be well aware of the path she needed to take. Of course, that path would be full of challenges. But if she found any obstacles insurmountable, I would smash them to pieces for her. If she couldn’t carry the burdens on her shoulders, I would lift them for her. My future in swordsmanship was tied inextricably to hers. We were both in the same boat.

“All you have to do is pick your path and say it out loud.” Kaeha hadn’t stopped swinging, so I continued beside her while I spoke.

If it were my choice, I would move Kaeha and her mother to Vistcourt. I still had a home there, and the monsters in the nearby Great Pulha Woodlands would make getting practical experience relatively easy. We could avoid coming into conflict with the other schools in the capital, and there were plenty of kind people in Vistcourt, so we wouldn’t have to worry about Kaeha’s mother being left alone.

But I doubted Kaeha would choose such an easy way out.

“I have relied on you for so much, Acer. You fixed my sword, you helped my mother, and you even brought Sir Clayas here. However, at the risk of sounding ungrateful, I am afraid I must make yet another request of you.”

Each time she swung her sword, the swing became sharper, crisper. Even as we were speaking, she was tempering and sharpening her resolve.

“In order to gain experience in combat, I will become an adventurer. However, I cannot leave my mother alone. I am sure she would tell me not to

worry about her, but she is my only living blood relative and the pillar that supports my very heart. So Acer, my only student, the most trustworthy person I know. I would like to ask you to take care of my mother.”

With that, her sword came to a stop.

Ah, I see.

If that was what she wanted, I was fine with it. Though I would be sad to see her go.

“If that is what you want. But I have two conditions. First, let me make some equipment for you before you go. Second, use my house in Vistcourt as your base of operations.”

I couldn't say “make sure you come back safe and sound.” Anything could happen to her once she took up a life of adventuring. So I wouldn't bend on these two conditions.

Having a weapon was one thing, but I couldn't let her go without proper armor. After all, she wasn't interested in harvesting plants and the like. She wanted experience in battle and would much prefer to take hunting quests. I would use all of my experience to make armor that would protect her without impeding her movements in the slightest.

Second, I would have her use my house in Vistcourt. The connections I'd made in the city could protect her as well as any armor. Even with her dojo in ruins, she was still a young lady. One could even call her something like a princess within the confines of the dojo itself. She had no skill at making money and was quick to trust people. If she were to become desperate and get wrapped up with the wrong crowd, combat experience would be the least of her worries. She wouldn't have to worry about paying rent at my house, and my friends living all around her would make it difficult for rougher folk to get close. She wouldn't be set for life by any means, but that should at least give her enough freedom to be able to train properly.

Kaeha had to choose her own path, but I wanted to support her to the best of my ability. Those were my conditions. I couldn't help but remember how Airena looked out for me when I had first emerged into the outside world. Maybe she had been feeling something similar to how I felt now.

“Very well. I have asked so much... No, never mind. Thank you. I will definitely become a swordswoman worthy of being called your master, so...please wait here a little longer.”

Returning her sword to its sheath, she spun and left the room. No hint of weakness or frailty remained in those eyes.



A large number of carpenters came into the Yosogi property and began dismantling the ruined dojo. They were clearly very good at what they did. Though it was by no means lightning fast, they kept up a brisk pace in their demolition. I could see why the blacksmithing guild had recommended them to me. My real strength was the connections I had made after all.

When Kaeha decided to leave and become an adventurer, I posed the idea of rebuilding the dojo. I had been entrusted with taking care of Kaeha’s mother, so I didn’t want to do anything that would force me to leave her side for extended periods of time. That would leave me unable to take care of the work the blacksmithing guild was requesting of me, so I thought of building a forge into the Yosogi residence itself.

If I was going to do that, it would be easier and cheaper to get both construction projects done at the same time. Rebuilding the entire dojo would blow through my savings rather quickly, but if I was able to get a forge out of it too, I could take on enough work from the blacksmithing guild to make some of that back.

Kaeha had been extremely apologetic, but really I was doing it for my own sake, so I didn’t mind at all. I might have been getting the shorter end of the deal, but at the very least it wasn’t a total loss.

And I used the dojo for practicing the sword as well. Just like Kaeha had done her whole life, I continued practicing everything she had taught me alone while I waited for her return. I felt a little bad for her, since she had to leave the capital before seeing the completed dojo. She was far and away the most excited of all of us as we went through the plans the carpenters had come up with, but she had clearly despaired at the news that construction would take half a year. Since I needed to be able to work, constructing the forge was the

top priority.

I had grown quite fond of that look of gentle disappointment on her.

Kaeha's mother had raised no objections to her daughter becoming an adventurer or to rebuilding the dojo. Of course, she had her own thoughts and feelings on the matter. She had lost her husband, and now her only remaining family was about to throw herself into danger. But even so, she sent her daughter off with a hug and a blessing, never trying to hold her back, and even thanking me for it.

She was a very strong, noble woman. Seeing that renewed my motivation to take care of her, at least until Kaeha made it back home.

Two seasons passed us by, and the dojo was completed. My daily life didn't change all that much, though. It mostly just meant I could move my practice indoors. I would wake up in the morning, eat breakfast, and then train. After lunch I would accompany Kaeha's mother in her shopping, after which I would work at the forge until night. Then it would be time for bed.

Staff from the blacksmithing guild would come to pick up the weapons and armor I had made. They'd then leave charcoal to fuel the forge, metal to forge with, and some money in their place. Strangely enough, since I began practicing swordsmanship, I also felt my blacksmithing had improved. By spending more time thinking about how my body moved, I was able to better understand the center of gravity of weapons and how armor affected the wearer's movement.

However, the construction of such a big dojo did not go unnoticed. As rumors spread of a skilled blacksmith living at the dojo, strange people began to visit. Some came demanding I make weapons for them since they were so famous, and others claimed we were wasting the dojo and so would come and take it for themselves. One or two idiots like that came almost every month. People from all over Ludoria gathered in the capital, but it seemed especially good at gathering fools.

Of course, no matter how strong those who threatened us were, a single word to the spirits of the wind would send them packing. I felt like it was a bit improper to use Spirit Arts to drive away challengers to the Yosogi School, but if

I tried to fend them off with my sword or bow, I wouldn't be able to avoid spilling blood. I was loath to dirty the brand-new dojo and residence with blood, so blowing them away with wind was the easiest solution.

Even so, having to fight off challengers at all left a bitter taste in my mouth. If they belonged to a particular organization, I could crush their home base and cut off the problem at its source. However, most were vagabonds parading themselves as warriors, with only a few small schools looking to make a name for themselves. In other words, most of the challengers had no base for me to attack.

Luckily the Three Great Schools didn't bother us at all, but it was a little unfortunate I couldn't crush one of them to serve as an example to ward off others. As my thoughts began to trend down such a dangerous path, I found myself no longer able to laugh at the worries Clayas had expressed in his letter.

Speaking of letters, Kaeha wrote to us about once a month, though sometimes less frequently when she was away for work. Merchants bringing materials harvested from monsters to sell in the capital delivered her letters to stores that we frequented. Of course, Kaeha's mother was the first to read any such letter. She was the one who would write the reply, so I only read the letters when she was done with them. I wasn't especially good at keeping up regular correspondence with people, so it was more convenient for me to add some small comments to her mother's letters when I had something to say.

Putting that aside, the first half of Kaeha's letters was always a report on her current situation. The remainder would be filled with accomplishments she was happy about, things she was concerned about, or sometimes just grumbling. When she had asked for cutlery in a restaurant to eat the meat she ordered, she had been laughed at and told to use her hands. After coming back from a mission with a temporary party, one of the men she had worked with started hitting on her, and she wasn't sure how to deal with him. She also spoke about what she had learned in battle and mistakes she had made.

Both her mother and I looked forward to reading about the joys and stresses of her new life. In her first year as an adventurer, though she hadn't joined any teams, she had made it to the rank of four stars. This achievement made her one of the faster-growing adventurers.

Being promoted too quickly ran the risk of her biting off more than she could chew without realizing it, but I could trust Clayas to keep her from overextending herself. I could rest assured knowing she was meeting the requirements for promotion without going overboard. It was clear that she was integrating her experience out in the field quickly, improving both her skill and rank at incredible speed. You could say that the fundamentals she had worked her whole life to refine were finally allowed to blossom into real skill.

I couldn't help but be a bit envious of Clayas, who was nearby to see it all happen. After all, she was the woman I had picked to be my master. I was the biggest fan of her swordsmanship.

I couldn't wait until she came home.



During Kaeha's second year as an adventurer, I received a request from the blacksmithing guild to participate in an event of making a sword to present to the king. I ended up coming in third, with both first and second place going to dwarves who lived in the capital. The battle for second place had apparently been a rather close call, but the king preferred more artistic and ornamental pieces, so my focus on creating a practical weapon didn't score as well. It would have been nice if they had told me that beforehand.

However, one of the knight captains took an exquisite interest in my sword and offered quite a hefty sum for it, so all's well that ends well I supposed. The one drawback was that it brought more people to my doorstep requesting that I make weapons for them just out of curiosity.

There were also a number of elven adventurers in the capital who followed the rumors to ask for advice on their equipment. They would show up simply to satisfy their curiosity about an elf who claimed to be a blacksmith, then immediately prostrate themselves upon seeing I was actually a high elf. That said, any elf who chose to live their life as an adventurer was a bit outside the norm. Once they realized I didn't like that treatment, they were much more casual with me.

Little by little, I was making new friends in the capital.

Kaeha also earned her fifth star that year. At the same time, perhaps because of how much that knight captain had liked my sword, I started getting many requests through the blacksmithing guild from nobles. But no matter the social standing of the client, the effort I put into my work would not change.

However, having servants of nobles added to the crowds already bothering me at the dojo was unpleasant. From demanding I prioritize their master's order, to offers of permanent employment, to invitations to dinner parties, the demands never stopped coming. I declined them all, but sometimes the more persistent lobbyists needed some "convincing" from the wind spirits to leave. The aristocracy may have held a large amount of power in Ludoria, but I didn't care.

After one incident where they sent an entire crowd I had to blow away, I filed a complaint with the blacksmithing guild. The nobles finally seemed to accept the fact that I was even more stubborn than a dwarf and that continuing to bother me would do nothing to help their cases.

That year, I joined the sword-making competition again. But despite adding much more ornamentation to my entry, I only managed second place. First place went to the same dwarf as the year before, so there was no doubt he was an incredible craftsman. It was common for dwarves to take all of the top ranks in the competition, so the fact an elf of all people had placed so high two years in a row was rather unprecedented. Considering I might well have been the only elven blacksmith to exist, I wasn't particularly surprised.

And of course, I didn't neglect my training with the sword just because I spent so much time making them. Though I wasn't quite at the level Kaeha was before she'd left, I felt like I was getting close. After all, my training was entirely based on my memory of Kaeha's practice. In a way, you could say all of my training thus far had been walking the road she had laid down.

Toward the end of the year, we received another letter from Kaeha. She had earned her sixth star and would soon be returning to the capital.

I spent that morning the same as any other, training with the sword, shopping with Kaeha's mother, and working at the forge. In anticipation of her daughter's

return, Kaeha's mother prepared a huge feast every night. I couldn't let that food go to waste, so I ate everything that was left over. If Kaeha didn't make it back soon, I was going to start putting on some serious weight.

As I wiped the sweat from my brow in front of the burning forge, a soft wind made its way through the open door behind me, cooling my skin. I had closed the door firmly, but it had cracked open of its own accord, letting in the gentle breeze. This was how the spirits of the wind informed me that someone was coming to the dojo.

"Okay, thanks for telling me. I'll go see."

Strapping my sword to my hip, I headed to the front gate. If the anticipation growing in my chest were to be answered, this would be my last day playing guard dog.

But the world didn't seem interested in answering my expectations.

After waiting at the gate for a while, I watched two people come inside. One was indeed Kaeha. Though she had been a young girl before she left, she was now unquestionably an adult. The way she carried herself was entirely different. The little girl who had to shoulder everything herself and could do nothing but struggle futilely against the world was no more. In her place was a woman, tall, proud, and serene.

The problem was the person standing beside her. The familiar face filled me with a faint sense of foreboding as I drew my sword to meet them.

As if guessing my intentions, Kaeha did the same. The moment our gazes crossed, we both stepped in and swung.

There was no sound of blades clashing. My sword had been sliced in two. There was no collision, only her sword cutting soundlessly through mine.

In the quality of the weapons alone, mine should have been better. Kaeha was still using the sword I had made for her three years prior, while I had made mine only six months ago. Even if only a little, I had improved in the past three years, so my weapon should have been at least slightly better than hers. But even so, the enormous gap in skill between us ended up with my sword in two pieces.

I see.

So this is what Kaeha's swordsmanship looked like after three years of experiencing actual combat. It was startlingly captivating. Though she had refined her skill in battle, it didn't look harsh or violent at all. If anything, it had only become more elegant. That was my first thought on seeing it. It seemed the three years she spent away had served her well. In only three years, such a bright and beautiful flower had grown.

"Welcome home, Master Kaeha. And...long time no see, Airena. You need me for something again, huh?"

Yet another guidepost in my journey was burned into my eyes. I felt bad for the sword that had been destroyed, but overall I was satisfied.

So I had to ask. Airena had appeared alongside her, meaning she had probably brought unpleasant news. I had the sneaking suspicion I wouldn't have time to catch up with Kaeha.



We couldn't just stand in the front gate all day, so we moved to the dojo. Though it was her home, she was clearly the most excited to see it as she looked around with wide eyes, a sight so amusing I couldn't quite stifle my laughter. I supposed despite seeing all the plans, she hadn't actually been around for its completion, so I couldn't hold it against her.

"It has been quite a while, Lord Acer. I was hoping to receive your assistance in freeing our captured comrades. Clayas informed me of where you were living and introduced me to Kaeha to bring me here."

That was how Airena greeted me, bowing deeply the moment she sat down. According to her, some nobles in Ludoria had secretly captured elves and enslaved them. It wasn't a particularly uncommon story, but I had to wonder how humans managed to pull it off, even if they were nobles.

Sensing my doubt, Airena continued. "The elves you know are all either from the Forest Depths, or adventurers like me who are a bit different from the usual. But those who live in ordinary forests outside the Great Woodlands are not so used to combat," she said with a strained smile.

Apparently there was a difference between being able to speak with the spirits and being able to effectively borrow their powers and use them in combat. It seemed it wasn't impossible for humans to overpower and capture elves after all. In short, some noble had used his private army to attack an elven village within his domain, taking those peaceful elves captive. Not many people would notice if such an insular settlement disappeared.

"In order to prevent them from reaching the spirits for help, the slaves have their eyesight stolen and are regularly drugged to dull their other senses. With their connection to the spirits gone, they are being...c-conditioned...to acknowledge the humans as their masters."

She didn't need to force herself to say something so difficult, but either way Airena managed to squeeze out those words.

I see.

If an elf's connection to the spirits was severed, their mental state would grow extremely unstable. From an elven perspective, it was like being cut off from the world itself. If they were confined to interacting with only a single person in that state, the relationship could be restructured in any way the captor wished.

Though it may have been callous of me, I couldn't help but feel impressed by a plan that required such forethought and knowledge of elves. Elves didn't change much over the course of their lives, and so they held an air of enduring refinement and elegance. That unchanging nature made them somehow fascinating to the ever-changing humans. While I couldn't understand what would motivate someone to take them as slaves, I could at least understand the fascination.

"I am sure this incident is known to the leadership of the kingdom," Airena said. "The fact they have not moved against the perpetrator means they must be someone of considerable standing and so cannot be easily punished."

This incident involved a high-ranking noble from the east of the kingdom, a marquis or a count. If their practice of secretly taking elves as slaves spread among the other nobility, it could eventually lead to the practice being legalized in the whole country. Freeing the captured elves wouldn't be enough to resolve

the situation.

In order to stop that from coming to pass, the noble responsible for starting it had to be held accountable for what they had done, and the kingdom itself needed to offer a public apology. Humans could easily forget the suffering of the past due to their short life spans. To protect elves from meeting the same fate again in the future, their pain would need to be engraved into the nation itself.

“So that’s why you can’t do it on your own.”

Airena was certainly capable of rescuing the captured elves by herself. She was a seven-star adventurer with much more sway on the human world than I had. But that influence wasn’t nearly enough to resolve a problem of this scale.

First, we would need to create some large-scale destruction in the noble’s territory, enough that anyone could clearly recognize it as the rage of the elves. We could then use that opening to free the slaves. Next, we would need to contact all of the elves living within Ludoria’s forests and have them leave the country.

Elven settlements were placed where nature was strongest, so if they were to leave those forests unattended, monsters would fill in the gaps and begin to multiply. That would lead to an increase in monsters outside of the forests as well. That was why elves in general had difficulty leaving their forests behind; more than anything else, they hated to see their beloved woodlands change. As such, convincing them to leave their old homes and accept new ones was a tall order that would take a high elf like myself.

Creating the level of destruction necessary would also require my powers. If we didn’t go that far, the lives of all elves would be in further danger, on a level even high elves like myself wouldn’t be able to help with.

“Okay. You don’t have to bow to me, Airena. I guess I won’t be able to live in Ludoria anymore, but that goes the same for you too. It’s not like it’s your fault.”

Understanding what that meant for us, I accepted Airena’s request. But sitting beside me, eyes wide in shock, Kaeha wasn’t so quick to agree.

“Wait, I...I haven’t taught you anything yet, Acer. I haven’t paid you back for anything! Not for the past three years, or for all the time before that!” She spoke forcefully, holding tight to my arm. Though she seemed much more in control after her three years away, the look in her eyes showed the strength of her feelings hadn’t been blunted in the slightest.

Glancing to the side, I saw Airena hadn’t raised her head. In other words, she had asked Kaeha to bring her here without telling her anything about what she intended to ask me. She was just as apologetic to Kaeha as she was to me.

I didn’t think there was any other option for us. From Airena’s perspective, saving the elves was the most important thing. In order to do that, she needed my power. But I couldn’t help resenting her a bit for dragging me into this situation.

“No, Master. Your display earlier has already been burned into my memory. You’ve provided me yet another excellent guidepost. Just like I have done for the past three years without you, I’ll be able to follow it on my own,” I said, putting my hand gently over hers where she grabbed my arm. She thought she hadn’t shown me anything, hadn’t repaid me at all, but that wasn’t true in the slightest. I had already earned back plenty on my investment here. I couldn’t say I had no regrets, but they were small enough that I could swallow them and move on.

“But if you think that’s not enough, then please keep training your swordsmanship. Teach new students, and your children as well.” In the end, as a high elf, I had all the time in the world. Once things died down, I could return and pick up where I left off. “I don’t know whether that’ll be ten, thirty, or fifty years from now. But if you’re not here anymore, I’ll learn from your descendants or your students.”

Kaeha’s hand squeezed my arm, hard enough to hurt. But that simple gesture was enough to express all the pain she felt from her hopes and excitement at returning home and teaching me properly being dashed.

“Very well. I will refine my swordsmanship and make sure it is passed down to the next generation. But I won’t let you learn from them. I won’t allow it. I am your master, so...you have to come back while I’m still alive.”

As she finally let go of my arm, I turned and bowed deeply to her. Her skills had been engraved into my memory, and her words into my heart.

I truly led a blessed life.



Preparing for what we were about to do required us to visit the forests, not just in Ludoria, but in the surrounding countries as well. It took us about half a year. I felt bad for the elves that had remained slaves for those six months, but if we didn't save all of them at once, any left behind would likely be disposed of to hide the evidence. So even though we had confirmed the locations of all the current slaves, we couldn't make any reckless moves until the rest of the elves had made their arrangements to relocate.

Our preparations finally came to completion. I found myself in Ludoria's eastern reaches, in a forest within the domain of a marquis, known to be some of the most fertile land in the nation. In truth, it had once been an elven settlement before being destroyed by that marquis's private army.

I had contemplated how we were going to make our attack countless times. For example, I could have asked the water spirit near Garalate to swell the rivers and flood the whole area. Another possibility was invoking spirits of wind and fire to create a blazing tornado that would cut across their lands. I had thought of many plans.

I gave up on the idea of a flood due to the damage it would cause to the other areas around my target. Flooding parts of the kingdom that produced food would destroy their crop entirely, potentially plunging the entire country into famine.

A fire tornado would be too directed in its killing, making it difficult to express that this was a conflict between elves and humans as a whole.

I needed to do something huge that would leave little real damage. After long deliberation, I made my decision.

"Great spirits dwelling in the earth, the land that supports everything above it. Lend me your power."

An earthquake centered on the marquis's territory. As I spoke, I struck my

palm upon the earth, and a powerful tremor shook the ground. To keep the earthquake under control, I needed to keep a firm mental image of my intended outcome. If I didn't express myself to the spirits clearly, they could bring about far greater destruction than I envisioned.

I focused on the area of the marquis's domain, consulting the mental map I had made while walking the land myself. I didn't want destructive, violent, vertical shaking but instead a slow, gentle, horizontal rolling. I suspected I was the only high elf capable of creating such a finely controlled earthquake, likely being the only one who had firsthand experience of them.

The earthquake was a level 4 on the Japanese intensity scale, a little stronger in some places, and lasted for no more than a few minutes. From what I remembered of my previous life, it would be enough to cause widespread concern without inflicting any serious damage. But for the people of Ludoria, who had never experienced an earthquake in their lives, it would be enough to scare the souls from their bodies.

I had timed it to happen before dawn, when most people would have started fires in their hearths, but I imagined it would still be quite a shock. Older homes might have been unable to bear the shaking and collapse on top of their residents. I would be responsible for all of those lives lost.

The location of the earthquake was restricted, and the nobles who had taken elves as slaves would soon be raided to free them, so the cause for the disaster would quickly become clear. The people's terror would soon turn to rage, aimed at the nobles who had brought this disaster upon them and the kingdom that had turned a blind eye to their crimes...but that didn't change the fact I was the one who did it.

No matter how I moped about it, though, nothing would change. Using the earthquake as their signal, the adventurers launched their attack to free the slaves, and the other elves began their move out of the kingdom.

The number of elves fleeing totaled around eight thousand. That number barely held a candle to the total population of the kingdom, but it was a lot more than I had expected.

Things had already begun moving. If, by any chance, the kingdom moved

immediately to execute the nobles responsible for taking elven slaves and publicly apologized for the incident, things would be resolved very quickly. We had made sure to tell the village chiefs that the elves would be able to return to their homes if that were to happen. But it wasn't a particularly likely outcome.

The kingdom would have difficulty admitting it had ignored these crimes. But a public apology from the crown would engrave that sin in their history, reducing the likelihood of it ever repeating. It was something we couldn't back down on, even if the brunt of the damage would be thrust on the innocent, hardworking people of the kingdom, just as I had warned the water spirit.

The gulf between elves and humans would not be so easily filled, but Airenna was in the best position to negotiate between them. Being a seven-star adventurer, she had significant clout in the human world. The kingdom wouldn't be able to treat her poorly.

But there were other problems this incident could lead to.

If any children were conceived from the elves in captivity, the tragedy would continue. Half-elves were detested in elven society, seen as harbingers of disaster. If their human traits were prominent, they might lose the ability to borrow the power of the spirits, making them further hated in a culture that valued a connection with the spirits above all else. There were also differences in the life span and speed at which elves and half-elves matured.

In many cases, half-elf children were returned to the earth the moment they were born. I had tried to explain to the elves that this kind of discrimination was meaningless, but there was no guarantee they would take my words to heart. I hoped at the very least they wouldn't heartlessly murder them...but it might have been safer to have someone else take them in.

At any rate, I could no longer stay in Ludoria. I had completely forgotten until this point, but I had never gotten around to learning magic.

So where should I head next?

Standing up and brushing the dirt from my hands, I drew the sword at my hip. The bright gleam of the steel in the morning light helped calm my uneasiness.

I then slowly took a swing. With singular focus, I chewed on the thoughts of the things the Kingdom of Ludoria had given me, briefly free from considerations as to whether this was the best solution.

Chapter 3 — The Sea, the Fishermen, and the Sailors

“It’s the ocean!”

I shouted with childlike joy as, for the first time since I had been reborn in this world, I felt a salt-laden wind blow past me. The cry leaped out of me as I finally failed to keep the tension building within me down.

I had traveled south from Ludoria, through another kingdom called Paulogia, and then into a nation known as the Vilestorika Republic which bordered the sea. As its name suggested, Vilestorika wasn’t a monarchy but a republic ruled by a parliament of prestigious families who elected a leader. It was a fairly small country, but access to the sea had brought it great wealth from trade, which it used to fund a powerful military.

There were frequent struggles over the Republic’s borders as Paulogia tried to secure the southern harbors for itself. Ludoria supported the war effort by exporting a steady stream of food to Paulogia, so neither were on good terms with them. As such, the path leading through Ludoria and Paulogia to the republic was hardly calm and peaceful, but I had a good reason to make such a journey. Or perhaps, three reasons.

Despite living in this world for quite a while, I had yet to taste seafood here a single time. There would have been no issue if I had simply been ignorant of it, but I had many memories of seafood from my past life. Those recollections always gave me an unbearable craving to try it again. So I made my way through the forests and fields, reaching the sea without using the main roads.

Actually, it was quite a difficult journey. On my way, I happened across a number of villages that put the extreme disparity in wealth between Paulogia and Ludoria on display. Maybe things would have looked different if I’d kept to the highways, but a community struggling to find potable water would be unthinkable in Ludoria. They were even neighbors to the city.

Well, puzzling over that issue wouldn’t solve anything. All I could do was pray that the girl who had provided water for me, and her village, would meet with

better luck. I did make a bit of a trivial promise with them, so it was possible we would cross paths again in my travels someday.

Beyond that, I had an interest in the various goods imported through the ports in Vilestorika from nations beyond the sea. The Republic maintained trade not only with the other nations it shared the coast with but also with a distant continent beyond the sea to the south. If I was going to encounter anything beyond my imagination in this world, this would be the place it was going to happen.

After all my issues with the Kingdom of Ludoria, I wanted to get far away and just see the ocean for myself.

But first, I wanted seafood. I particularly wanted shellfish. It would be perfect if they had soy sauce as well, but that was probably asking too much. I might have been able to find fish paste if I tried hard enough, but shellfish seasoned with salt was already plenty delicious. Oh, eating them with butter was also a good option.

My heart filled with anticipation, I made my way to the gates of a port town called Saurotay. As one would expect, my identification from Vistcourt wasn't sufficient to get me into a city in the Republic. And while my master blacksmith license would be valid here, I would stand out enough just for being a traveling elf. The fact I was an elven *blacksmith* would have news of me spreading like wildfire. So instead, I called myself a traveling swordsman-in-training and paid the full toll to enter the city without having to show identification.

The toll to enter cities in Vilestorika without identification was three silvers. That was triple the cost to get into a city in Ludoria, but apparently if one had identification, they could come and go freely. It seemed the Republic, in an effort to encourage trade, wanted to make it easier for those whose identities could be confirmed to come and go as they pleased, while restricting access to others in an effort to discourage spies.

So of course, when I tried to enter the city, I was met with a barrage of questions. First, my name and age. Next, where I came from, and where I was headed. My reason for coming to this city. How long I planned on staying. Et cetera, et cetera. But I got the feeling that they had gone somewhat easy on me

for being an elf. After all, I stood out far too much to be a decent spy. But after learning I had come from Ludoria, the guard was clearly wary of me.

“Sorry, friend. We’ve had a lot of trouble coming from up north, so we have to thoroughly vet anyone who comes through. But with that done, welcome to Saurotay. You won’t be disappointed in the seafood you’re looking for here, I promise. Have fun!”

Since I didn’t provide any identification, I was taken into a side room and questioned for twenty or thirty minutes. When my interrogation was over, the guard finally let me through into the city. But really, I couldn’t complain about a city guard taking his job seriously. He could have dragged out the questioning in hopes of receiving a bribe to get through, but seeing him handle things responsibly spoke well of the city’s safety.

He also recommended three shops I should visit. Still brimming with excitement, I gave my thanks and made my way into the city. As for why he recommended those three places, the first was for travelers unaccustomed to eating seafood. It avoided cooking with strong shellfish and didn’t serve food like raw fish and carpaccio. The second was more for the experienced and was frequented by the locals. The final recommendation was a shop where fishermen directly brought their catches in and stopped for a drink. This was an establishment only for veteran connoisseurs.

Naturally, without even stopping to think about it, I headed for the last one. The store stood close to the harbor, serving fish brought straight from the sea. There was no way it could be anything less than phenomenal. I was sure anywhere I ate in the city would be a fresh and new experience, but it was my style to pick the best among them to start.



As I pushed through the front door into the bar, its hinges protested with a loud creak. It seemed they had grown quite rusty due to the salt in the air. Though it couldn’t really be avoided, seeing rusted metal left to rot struck me with a pang of sadness. That was just a personal sentiment, though. Whether they rusted easily or not, the fact remained that most metals rusted eventually. It was simply a law of nature. I’d known of art that used metal while taking into

account its penchant for rust, and some that wouldn't even be considered complete until they had thoroughly rusted.

Setting those thoughts aside, I looked around the bar for an empty seat. Unfortunately, the seats at the counter were all occupied, so I asked one of the waitresses if I could sit at one of the tables. Was she a showgirl for the shop? She wasn't especially pretty, but her energetic personality had a definite charm to it...and she was certainly dressed as one.

She seemed a bit surprised to see me. "Wow, I never expected such a beautiful elf to come to a shop like ours. I guess the world is full of surprises. Of course, please, please come in! Sit down, sit down!"

She said "a shop like ours" as if they were some no-name hole in the wall, but I couldn't disagree more. My excitement was already through the roof. A quick glance around the room showed the bar was full of fishermen and sailors, drinking and making merry. Burly as they were, the size of their arms still didn't compare to Oswald's. But what had me more excited was the food they were eating.

"I'd like one of each of your best recommendations for cooked and raw fish. Six large cooked shellfish as well. And please get me something to drink that matches." I didn't know the names of the fish and shellfish in this world yet, so I left the details up to the waitress. I already felt like it didn't matter what I ordered. For some reason, I expected anything they put in front of me would be interesting. Though really, I didn't think I *could* be disappointed by fresh seafood at this point.

"Gotcha, Mr. Elf. You eat a lot for being so skinny, huh? You look pretty buff though, so I guess you can handle it." After taking my order with a laugh, the waitress made her way to the kitchen, shaking her rear as she went, artfully dodging around the hands of customers that reached out to touch her. She had called me "buff," but that had been my first impression of her as well.

The first thing to make it to the table was a drink, which I gave a taste test. It seemed like a rather dry cider, so I decided to wait for the food to come before drinking much more. Though I had only tasted a little, the small bit of alcohol and stimulation of my taste buds caused my appetite to well up.

Whether it was raw or cooked, I really just wanted a bite of squid. But looking around the room, I couldn't see anyone eating anything that looked like it. I couldn't imagine there were no squid in the oceans here, but it was possible squid and octopi were avoided here just from their appearance.

"Sorry for the wait. Here's your redfish salad with white oil and your six grilled shellfish. The other fish is pretty big, so it'll take a little longer for it to cook through."

As the waitress served my first round of food, my heart cried out in joy.

The first thing that caught my eye was the shellfish. They sat on the plate with their shells popped open, each the size of my fist. It was no wonder the waitress was surprised at the thought of me eating all this. I obviously couldn't fit a whole one in my mouth, so I used a fork to pry the meat from the shell, then sliced it into three with a knife.

Cutting the shellfish caused them to leak all sorts of juices, but they were still just as hot and juicy when biting into them as I could have hoped for. Though it felt like I was drinking the shellfish as much as eating it, I finally finished one. The taste was so phenomenal I couldn't even think about adding seasoning to it.

However, I didn't want my next bite to get overwhelmed by the lingering flavor, so before I moved on, I took a drink of cider. Though it wasn't even that cold, it did a great job of cooling my mouth after the hot shellfish.

I was in heaven.

The redfish salad with white oil looked close to what I would have called a salmon carpaccio. It was quite delicious, but didn't have the same impact as the shellfish. That said, it was quite easy to eat. I felt like I could eat it for days.

As I was enjoying my salad and shellfish, the doors of the kitchen opened to let the waitress through with a large plate bearing grilled fish. It was huge. Seeing my delighted smile as I watched her approach, the waitress smiled back.

But that was when it happened.

"What the hell?! Say that again, I dare you!"

Looking to the source of the sudden shouting, I saw a larger man's fist sink into the jaw of a smaller man, sending him flying. I wasn't really thinking anything at the time, but my body moved on its own. Leaping out of my seat, I pulled the waitress out of the way of the careening victim. Though I rescued her from the impending collision, the man still struck the plate holding my fish, sending it spiraling to the floor.

For a brief moment, I was heartbroken to see the grilled fish ruined, but it only took a second for my grief to turn to anger.

I see, I see.

So this was how they did things in Saurotay? Then I'd happily join in. Stepping in front of the blustering victor of that brawl...

"You killed my fish, you son of a bitch! Summary execution for you! Apologize to that fish with your life!" I shouted furiously and slugged him in his bewildered face, my fist strengthened by the pent-up tension of my journey for this seafood and the energy of having drunk a bit of alcohol. The tragedy became my fury, and I immediately leaped into battle.

Elves were about the same height as humans, or maybe a little taller, but we were rather thin. High elves were no different, our slender bodies being significantly less muscular than the average human. But with over ten years of work as a blacksmith and further training in swordsmanship to hone my reflexes, I was far beyond the average elf. No matter if he was a large, muscular ruffian, no one could take a punch from me unscathed. Or so I thought.

"Agh, wh-what the hell? What do you think you're doing?!"

Much to my surprise, the man took the blow without issue and immediately countered. I dropped my chin to take the incoming punch with my forehead, but the strike still left me seeing stars. He had a terrifyingly powerful punch.

But this was war. If I retreated even a single step, I would lose.

"I *said*, apologize to my fish!" I stepped in, delivering another solid hook to the side of his face.

The ensuing fistfight was truly one for the ages.



“Yes, I lost my temper. I am terribly sorry.” I bowed deeply under the barkeeper’s furious gaze. The waitress vouched for me since I had saved her just before, but the ensuing violence was entirely my fault. There was no protecting me from that.

“Hold on, Grand. I’m the one who messed with his food. It’s not his fault.” Even the man I had fought with was trying to cover for me. No, that wasn’t quite it. We had been fighting together, so it was only right we were both punished. But he was trying to take the punishment for me. However, it seemed the man named Grand was well aware of that.

“Of course it was your fault, Dreeze. How many times have you started a fight in my bar now? Huh? I don’t care that we’re old friends. It’s about time I split your empty skull open for good!” the barkeeper raged at the man I had been fighting.

This was bad. He was absolutely terrifying. He looked just like Master Damned Dwarf did when something stupid interrupted his work. Grand may have been in a different business, but a craftsman was still a craftsman, and their rage was unmatched.

“L-Listen, that bastard from Laurette called the food here crap. He said it had no elegance. So I sorta lost it...” Buckling under Grand’s pressure, Dreeze said something unbelievable.

No, no, there was no way. Maybe the food here wasn’t trying to be particularly refined or elegant, but there was no way I’d stand for someone calling it crap. Now that I thought about it, the man Dreeze had punched first had immediately fled the bar after the fight broke out, even though he was the trigger for the whole incident.

“Oh, really? Sorry, I can fully understand why you’d get mad. Even *I’m* angry hearing that. Looks like I punched the wrong guy...” As I fumed again, Dreeze stared at me stunned for two or three blinks before his face broke into a hearty smile. He stepped up beside me and clapped me on the shoulder.

“Right? This guy gets it! I ruined your fish though, so I get why you’d punch me. Oh, are you gonna be in town long? I’ll catch something to make it up to

you.” He seemed ecstatic. I couldn’t help but smile alongside him at his sudden and all-too-welcome suggestion.

“Oh, you boys made up, did you? That’s great,” Grand said, “but you need to be apologizing to *me*! Eh, you did call my food fantastic though. Pay for the tables and chairs that you broke, and I’ll let you off the hook for today. Also, you better be bringing that fish here to get it cooked!” Our behavior seemed to sap much of the anger from the barkeeper.

And that was how, after just arriving in the city, I made friends with the fisherman Dreeze, the barkeeper Grand, and the waitress Caleina. These connections eventually led to my involvement in the situation in this city.

Grand introduced me to an inn that was close to the harbor. I decided to make that my place of residence while I stayed in Saurotay, and I paid for my first week in advance. As expected of an inn recommended by the locals, the rooms were kept clean and the staff were polite and courteous. It wasn’t an especially luxurious place, but it was comfortable and pleasant.

I felt itchy all over from experiencing the ocean breeze for the first time in this world, and so I got plenty of hot water to clean myself. As I wiped my face with a hot cloth, the spots where Dreeze had punched me started to sting. I suspected they would be quite swollen the next day.

Though I had to admit I had acted rather stupidly, it had been a day full of excitement. But my right hand was also sore, so I figured I’d better be a bit more careful. Whether it was practicing swordsmanship or blacksmithing, I needed that hand. If I injured myself for stupid reasons like today, my skill in both of those endeavors would suffer. That would be an insult to both Oswald and Kaeha.

Though I expect Master Damned Dwarf would say if I hurt my hand fighting, I just hadn’t trained enough. I don’t think anything I could do would get my fists as hard as his, so I considered getting some leather gloves for fighting.

Putting the fight aside, my plan for the next day was to visit Dreeze at his boat. He had promised to catch me a fish to pay for the one he ruined, so if possible I wanted him to catch a squid or octopus for me. Even if they were

unconventional food in this world, me being an elf would go a long way in explaining that away.

I was really excited for the morning, but something was still bothering me: the man that Dreeze had punched first, who had run away. There were people in this world who thought “the customer is always right” like in my previous life, just because they brought in money. But to speak so poorly of a bar’s food around all of its regular customers, especially when they were all rugged fishermen, seemed beyond reason. It was no surprise he had ended up immediately getting slugged.

And despite having the guts to talk like that, he had taken the first chance he could to slip out of the fight and run away. His behavior seemed somehow inconsistent. Maybe he had just tasted something bad and let it slip without thinking. But I couldn’t imagine anything served in that bar being deserving of complaint.

Dreeze had mentioned him being a sailor for some company or other. I really couldn’t shake a feeling of unease. As I struggled with that problem in my head, I finished bathing and turned in early for the night in preparation for the next day’s adventures.



The answer to my doubts from the previous night came as I headed to the pier Dreeze had told me about.

As I arrived, I found Dreeze and his fellow fishermen surrounded by a crowd of other sailors. One of them looked vaguely familiar, a healthy bruise marring his face. The sailors far outnumbered the fishermen, and rather than looking simply volatile, it felt like I had stepped into the beginning of a lynching. But rather than cursing my luck for finding myself here, I was glad I had made it in time.

“Hey, elf! Get out of here! This has nothing to do with you, so run!” Dreeze immediately called out to me. Though I had no idea what was going on here, the moment I heard him say that, I decided to take the side of this man I had only met yesterday.

The sailors and fishermen turned to look at me.

“Yo, Dreeze. I’m here for the fish. Things seem pretty dicey here, though. You okay? Actually, I’m here because I want you to catch something specific for me.” Ignoring the countless gazes on me, I walked toward Dreeze. Really, I didn’t care about the situation. Ever since arriving in Saurotay, everything had been settled with violence. So to match the style of the city, I was happy to use a little violence myself. But I had learned my lesson the day before about punching people with my bare fists.

Dreeze was short-tempered and quick to fight, but I could tell he wasn’t a bad guy deep down. And if he was willing to catch a fish for me, then of course I’d help him out.

“Stop right there, elf. This has nothing to—whoa?!” A sailor tried to step into my way, but a blast of water from the sea knocked him aside. It had just been water, so even if the impact was enough to knock him unconscious, I doubted he was actually injured.

“What was that? Don’t get in my way. I have business with Dreeze here. If you try to stop me, you’ll regret it.” I warned them out of kindness. We were already at the harbor, the entire ocean behind us. The spirits that lived in such an enormous body of water were incredibly powerful. I took that into consideration and tried to go easy on the sailors, but the spirits’ answer to my summons would still be considerably stronger than normal.

“H-He’s the one who started it! We’re just here getting revenge! Don’t butt in on our business!” Yet the sailors ignored my warning, encircling me with obvious hostility.

Ah, I see.

So the man had intentionally provoked Dreeze the day before so they could use his attack as a pretense for getting revenge. In that case, I wasn’t unrelated at all.

“Ah, about yesterday. That guy knocked my dinner onto the floor. You think I have nothing to do with this? Even though he’s the one that ruined my food by trying to pick fights?”

Thinking of the ruined fish, I grew angry all over again. The waves in the sea beside us grew larger, shaking the ships moored nearby. Apparently the spirits

had sensed my anger and interpreted it as a precursor to greater conflict, even though I hadn't asked them to do anything yet. It seemed they were a bit too eager to pick a fight.

"Who the hell—gah!" The sailors shouted and lunged forward to punch me, but instead were sent flying by successive jets of water. Many of them landed upon the ground, but some were unlucky enough to fall into the ocean. Realizing they couldn't win, the sailors' morale immediately crumpled, and those still standing fled with no regard to their fallen comrades.

The only ones left standing were Dreeze and his dumbstruck fishermen.

"I guess we should call the guards about this, but maybe we should at least help the guys who fell in the water first. Or did you want to leave them for the fish?" At my joke, the fishermen snapped back to reality and immediately set about rescuing the sailors that had fallen into the sea.

"Y-You're quite the guy, Mr. Elf. If you're that strong, why did you settle for punching me yesterday? If you'd used this power, I would've been down in one hit." After pulling the sailors out of the water, the fishermen agreed to let them go without calling the city guard. With the incident resolved for now, Dreeze turned to me, confused. Many of the other fishermen had witnessed the fight in the bar the day before and had the same question.

"Huh? It was a one-on-one fight in a bar. You didn't even have a weapon, so why would I ask the spirits for help? If a drunk attacked you by himself with nothing but his bare hands, would you call your friends to help you fight? That would be pretty pathetic."

To me, the spirits were like close friends. But no matter how I thought about it, a drunken bar fight was a wildly inappropriate place to be using their powers. It had been a fair fight. Though I supposed that was my first ever drunken fistfight.

Of course, if Dreeze had called his friends over to help him, things would have been different. I would have had no issue calling on the spirits in that case.

Dreeze gave me a bright smile, seemingly happy with my answer. He was probably wondering if I had just been going easy on him. I really hadn't. My

hand still hurt!

“You’re quite the guy, Mr. Elf! Looks like I owe you another one. We’re just about to head out fishing. Is there anything you want? It’s all up to the god of the sea, but I’ll take requests too.”

It seemed he was trying to change the subject to hide something from me, but it was probably because he didn’t want to draw me any further into the conflict between his fishermen and those sailors. If Dreeze was intent on keeping quiet, I was in no place to try and force it out of him. So instead I let it go, explaining what a squid and octopus looked like and that I wanted to eat them.

“You mean an eightleg or a tenleg? You eat those things, Mr. Elf? You know they spit that black stuff from their mouths, right? I’m pretty sure you’ll die if you try eating them.” Dreeze frowned at my request. As I had predicted, neither squid nor octopi were normally eaten in this world. That said, “eightleg” and “tenleg” seemed pretty sad excuses for names.

“It’s because I’m an elf. I know ways of eating seafood that humans don’t. No one sells it in the market, so if you won’t catch one for me, I don’t have any other options...” Seeing my disappointment, Dreeze hurriedly changed his tune, piling his fishermen into their boat. I didn’t know what the fishermen of this world were like, but the fact they didn’t turn down my request meant they were likely confident they could catch one.

I was looking forward to it.

Dreeze seemed to be a good guy after all. So if he didn’t want to tell me more about the issues he was having, I wouldn’t press him... But I *would* start looking into the conflict between the sailors and the fishermen on my own in secret. Part of that was no more than curiosity, but I was also concerned about the friends I had just made in this town.

Though the breeze coming off the ocean was pleasant, the atmosphere around the harbor was heavy and restless.



After removing the internal organs from the octopus and rubbing salt into it

to leach out the sliminess, you could then rinse it to be ready for boiling. After that, it was just a matter of cutting it into appropriately sized pieces. Soy sauce would be a perfect match, but it was still quite delicious on its own.

“This is amazing! The texture is fantastic, and that faint salty flavor really makes me want a drink.” I dug in, ignoring Dreeze’s nauseous expression as he watched me eat. If I had wanted to teach others here how good it could taste, I would have had it served in a way that disguised it. But I was happy enough to have some for myself. I could have borrowed a forge to make a proper iron plate for making takoyaki, but frankly that was more work than I was interested in. Considering the conductive properties of metal, a copper plate might be better.

“I tasted some of it. It was actually good. If I could study these eightlegs, I bet I could make something pretty great,” Grand said as he placed a fresh mug of hard cider on the table beside me. He was the one who had prepared the octopus for me. Apparently his position as a chef compelled him to taste his creation before serving it to me.

“Ugh, seriously? Hey, Mr. Elf. Can I try a bit?” Dreeze gingerly reached for the table, his interest piqued by the endorsement from his old friend. He was the one who had caught it and brought it back here, so I was happy to let him have as much as he wanted. That being said, I’d be pretty mad if he ate all of it.

“Squid...er, ‘tenleg,’ you called it? Those are also really good. After gutting them and taking off the suction cups, you salt it and let it dry in the sun before frying it up.” As I watched Dreeze deal with the bewildering new sensation of octopus out of the corner of my eye, I told Grand about some other options. Tragically, Dreeze had figured eightlegs and tenlegs were the same thing, so he had only brought back an octopus. Honestly, I was grateful enough that he had managed to bring back anything, but this level of carelessness was still baffling.

Grand’s eyes sparkled with curiosity at my suggestion. “Hey, Dreeze. Why didn’t you bring a tenleg back? Get out there and find one.” Grand tried to force Dreeze out the door immediately, but I was content to wait another day for a chance to eat squid. The fantastic result from the octopus had left me totally satisfied. I was already planning on staying in town until I tired of seafood. To that end, I wanted Dreeze to be able to focus on fishing without having to worry

about any other trifling matters.

Keeping an ear open at my inn and around town, it didn't take long for me to figure out what was happening in Saurotay. There was a rather heated dispute going on over usage of the harbor between the merchants with their larger ships and the local fishermen with their smaller ones.

For most of its life, Saurotay had been propped up by its fishing industry. The fishermen of the city had long been backed by the illustrious Pasteli family, who commanded great respect in the area with their seat in the Republic's parliament.

However, Pasteli control had been greatly shaken when another large family, the Toritrines, set up their headquarters there. The Toritrine family held the same sway in parliament as the Pastelis, but their main source of income was trade. They had come to Saurotay to create a new base of operations from which their many corporations, the Laurette Company among them, could operate.

At first, the two families had happily joined hands in the development of the city. The more popular the city became for trade, the more they could sell their fish. More fish selling meant profit for the fishermen. But at some point, relations between the two began to fracture.

For example, the merchant ships sat deeper in the water, so they asked for the harbor to be dug deeper. They wanted to encourage more ships coming to trade, so they requested to have more of the harbor to themselves. After all, small fishing boats could simply launch from the beach. Then if the harbor was expanded, more merchants would come. So the beaches should be converted into more harbor space. And so on.

I didn't know whether this was a common issue in coastal cities, but it had at least been enough to make sparks fly in Saurotay. If only one family with a hold on parliament were in the area, they would easily crush any competition and resolve the situation quickly. But there were two diametrically opposed families here, so the conflict escalated even to the point of violence.

Dreeze was quick to pick a fight, but he was strong and took care of those

around him. He had become a figure for the younger fishermen to rally around, so the Laurette Company had attempted to lynch him under the pretense of a personal vendetta.

It was a really difficult situation. Even though a lynching in and of itself was terrible, neither side was fundamentally wrong. Both the merchants and the fishermen were trying to protect and improve their way of life. There was nothing inherently evil in that.

In addition, if either side were to disappear completely, the other would be in just as much trouble. Without the merchants and their support, Saurotay would be sent back to its days as a humble fishing village. Now that the fishermen had tasted the fruits of prosperity, returning to their old lifestyle would be a long and difficult process.

And if the fishermen left, the city wouldn't be able to provide the food needed to support the merchants and their crews. Food could be brought in from other cities, but the value of the city would definitely decrease. Not to mention, the brawny fishermen of the Pasteli family were a critical part of maintaining peace in a city bustling with people visiting in ships from all over.

In short, both sides needed the other. So there was no sign of resolution in the near future.



Elves very much stood out in the human world. While it was certainly possible for me to get lost in a crowd, the majority of people that I met viewed me with shock and surprise. That didn't bother me in the least. There were plenty of ways in which standing out was a hindrance, but I couldn't say it was all bad.

For example, once rumors started spreading about me around a city, it became difficult to do anything in secret. But I often stood out so much that problems would start working themselves out even without direct action on my part. Some people chose to avoid me, resentful toward a stranger who stood out so much, but others went out of their way to be kind to such a rare guest. In the end, it was all a roll of the dice.

So, what number had I rolled this time?

A letter arrived on my fourth day in Saurotay. It was an apology for the quarrel the other day and an invitation. The sender was of course the Laurette Company, operating under the Toritrine family. The sailors were basically asking me to visit them so they could formally apologize.

Among the various companies under the Toritrine family, the Laurette Company was renowned for seeking profit by whatever means necessary. There were even rumors that they were involved in activities on the sea that made them hard to distinguish from pirates. It was fairly likely they did actually mean to apologize and smooth things over with me, but depending on how the conversation went, it could very well be a trap.

So naturally, I ignored the invitation. After all, even if they had some business with me, I had none with them. Filling my belly with the fish Dreeze caught and Grand cooked was far more interesting than getting empty apologies from some merchants.

But maybe my show of indifference was the cause of what happened next.

On the night of my fifth day in the city, on my way home from Grand's bar, I had gone to the beach for a walk so I could look out over the sea at night. While there, I was suddenly surrounded by a group of armed men. The men drew their swords without a word.

They didn't seem to be content with just threats. It was as if, after seeing me come to the beach at night alone, they felt it was a good chance to eliminate me. If we had been in the city, they might have left things at a warning, but the beach was all too convenient a place to dispose of a body. They must have thought that if they all rushed me at once, at least one of them would get me before I could knock them all out with blasts of water.

But of course, I had lured them here intentionally. Ever since my first encounter with the sailors, I had felt someone watching me. The stalker had been pretty good at hiding among the crowds, but the wind spirits had taken notice. So after the letter I had received the day before, I made sure to remain sober and intentionally act in a way that would seem reckless.

That said, I couldn't say I expected them to fall into my trap quite so perfectly. Maybe they were in too much of a rush or were greatly underestimating me. Or

maybe I was just that much of a threat to them.

One thing I did notice, however, was that my tail was not among those around me. The fact I could still feel their gaze on me from afar meant that, even if the Laurette Company didn't feel the same way, my stalker at least was very much on guard.

Without a word, the men surrounding me lunged with their swords. Moonlight glittered across their curved cutlasses.

The cutlass was a weapon loved by sailors, its short blade ideal for fighting in confined spaces. In other words, it was a poor choice for a wide-open beach like this. Leaping backward to avoid them, my back was against the water, leaving me nowhere to run. But I had no intention of running from the start.

"Spirits of the earth," I whispered an entreaty to the spirits as I drew my own sword and stepped forward with a slash. The wet sand of a beach was terrible footing for someone who wasn't used to it. But if you were familiar with the sand, you could move with confidence, predicting how your feet would sink into it.

So when that sand turned solid as stone beneath them, they were all thrown off-balance.

As they stumbled, I brought the techniques of Kaeha's Yosogi School to bear, my flashing blade allowing no counterattack. Five men had attacked me, and I had made three slashes. In those three slashes alone, the cutlasses held by the five men had all been split in two, rendering them useless toys.

The blades snapped easily, as if welcoming their destruction. Whoever made them didn't seem to have done a very good job, and these men probably didn't maintain them very well either. Though they had been prepared to be attacked by water, they hadn't expected me to retaliate with a sword. I wasn't as good as Kaeha, but I still had considerable skill.

Thoroughly disarmed, the confused men froze, neither pressing their attack nor retreating. Not that it mattered much what they did anymore.

"One more time, please, spirits of the earth."

At my request, the spirits opened the ground beneath the men's feet and

buried them in the sand. While they were entombed up to their necks, I checked their faces. None of them were familiar. I surveyed the area around me, but my stalker had disappeared.

According to the wind spirits, they had fled into the city the moment the fight broke out.

I made a third request to the earth spirits, a small prank coming to mind.

If anyone came to dig these men out, they would find themselves trapped as well. That should catch a few more people for me.

I had no intention of killing them, so I would have Dreeze come to apprehend them before the tide changed. But as punishment for attacking me, I'd give them a good scare.



Besides those five assailants, ten others who had come to save them had been found buried in the sand. Since all fifteen of them were sailors working for the Laurette Company, when they were apprehended by the city guard, the company couldn't evade accusations of having tried to kill me.

On top of that, the ensuing investigation by the city guard turned up plenty of instances of harassment toward fishermen and fraudulent activity in trade, all with the motive of expanding their own business. Though I doubted it would shutter the company for good, a number of high-ranking officials were brought up on charges, so the company's reach would likely be greatly reduced.

In other words, after being caught attacking me for no good reason, the Laurette Company had lost their backing from the Toritrine family. Otherwise, there was no way so many other crimes would have come to light. There was also a possibility that the Toritrine family was using the Laurette Company as a scapegoat for their own crimes. Either way, the fact that a trading company had attempted to murder a traveler—and failed horrendously, no less—was significant enough a scandal for the Toritrine family.

Of course, there was no way that this would resolve all the problems facing Saurotay. Though one of their companies being curtailed would no doubt damage the Toritrine family, the Pasteli family made no move to crush them.

Even if the Laurette Company or Dreeze's fishermen didn't understand, the Toritrine and Pasteli families were indispensable to each other. They used the conflict between the sailors and the fishermen as a way to relieve the pressure built up by their constant tug-of-war, all the while contributing to the city of Saurotay.

The only real loser at the end of this incident was the violent Laurette Company. Though the whole affair seemed to come out of nowhere, its resolution didn't change much. It was as if everything ran according to some predetermined plan. It was quite possible I had been no more than a convenient tool for somebody. There were any number of people I could accuse, and the more I thought about it, the scarier it would become. I decided to tuck the issue away in the back of my mind for the time being.

I spent about a month eating and drinking at Grand's bar before I had my fill of seafood. This was my last night in Saurotay.

"Here's your salt-dried tenleg. You're a big fan of this, right, Acer? Tons of people are now asking for eightleg and tenleg. I guess it's your fault we're so busy," Caleina, the bar's server, said with a laugh as she brought the squid I ordered to the table. Though I guess her being busy wasn't just a result of the bar being busy.

"If you're that busy, get Grand to hire more people or give you a raise. Grand's got a lot more cooking he can do with eightlegs and tenlegs, so he's going to have more customers too." Laughing at Caleina's grimace, I drank a mouthful of cider.

There were a few problems here, but Saurotay was a good city. As it developed, conflict over which direction that development should take naturally caused problems. That was all a part of the city's liveliness in my eyes. I had thoroughly enjoyed my month of seafood and friendship here, so now felt like as good a time as any.

"You seem pretty busy, but I'm about ready to head out of town, so that should reduce your workload a bit."

Caleina stared back at me wide-eyed for a brief moment. Yes, I knew the one

who had been spying on me the whole time was Caleina.

But that didn't change much. Despite the sanctions levied against the Laurette Company, she had maintained her vigil on me. In short, it wasn't the Laurette Company that had hired her to keep an eye on me. It may have been the Toritrine family, the Pastelis, or even both of them.

She was a spy that had laid deep roots in the city. I didn't know if Grand was involved, or if he even knew what Caleina was doing. At the very least, I figured she was getting paid by the Laurette Company. I didn't have any proof, but just as I had thought on first meeting her, she seemed to be quite a strong woman.

"I guess with all you eat, that'll make things easier for us. But it'll be lonely without you. Dreeze and Grand will miss you...and of course, I will too," Caleina said with a smile. I guess she *was* the one who saw me most often in Saurotay. The details of that condition aside, it was a little emotional. Would it be too much to call this a secret relationship?

"Thanks. But I'll definitely be back. I'm sure I'll want to eat fish, shellfish, eightleg, and tenleg again soon enough."

Caleina nodded. This wasn't a goodbye forever. Though I was satisfied for now, my craving for seafood could return in six months to a year. I hoped that as Saurotay continued to develop, it would still be recognizable when I made it back.

So, where should I go next?

I was getting a bit antsy being away from a forge for so long, and I was really interested in learning some magic. I was curious about how things were going in Ludoria and if any half-elves had been born too, so it would be a good idea to settle down somewhere and contact Airena. So I made up my mind.

"Tomorrow morning, I'm going to head northeast. I guess I'll head for Odine. I heard it's called the Land of Magic." I told the waitress and spy my destination. It was the truth. By telling her my destination, it expressed a lack of hostility on my part toward whomever she reported to. I was sure she'd understand what I meant.

"I'll look forward to seeing you here again," she replied. "Next time, why

don't we walk around town and enjoy the food of the city together? Of course, it'll be a secret from Grand."

With a mischievous laugh, Caleina offered a hand, which I responded to with a resounding high five.

And so I left the city of Saurotay behind.

Chapter 4 — A Traveler's Whims

After the collapse of the eastern Empire of Azueda due to a succession war, its cities had each declared themselves independent, creating a collection of independent city-states. Each of these city-states held a very small territory, typically just the area within their own walls and the surrounding villages. There were dozens of cities in the area, but the largest nation among them held control over only three.

In short, they were small fish in a big pond. What kept these small-fry countries from being eaten up by the surrounding big fish was the united front they showed against outside threats. Any invasion from outside their small collection of nations prompted them to temporarily set aside all internal disputes and mobilize a united army to repel the invaders. They called themselves the Azueda Alliance. It was almost exactly like how small fish in the sea banded together to create the illusion of being a bigger fish.

The cities of the Alliance often fought over resources, so they weren't exactly on good terms with each other, but each of them was aware that their existence depended on the other cities around them. So mutual trade and defense of the Alliance was held together both by the Alliance's terms and a series of unspoken agreements between the cities.

One example was the founding of a new city, Odine. The city was built using the resources of all the other nations, to research magic and provide training for the mages that were so instrumental in leveling the playing field between the inferior armies of the Alliance and their outside threats. In order to keep any of the city-states of the Alliance from holding a monopoly on such magic, it was made independent. And so Odine came to be known as the Land of Magic.

Okay, enough explanation.

For someone foreign to the area, let alone someone like me who wasn't even human, the intricacies of the situation in the Alliance were an absolute chore to figure out. What I did know was that if I went to Odine, there was a good

chance I'd meet a skilled mage. Even if I couldn't find someone to act as my teacher, the idea of a city built exclusively for the purpose of studying magic had a firm grip on my curiosity.

Before leaving the city of Saurotay, I sent a letter to Airena indicating my intention to visit Odine. If I spent a while in the city, I was sure I'd hear from her eventually. That said, there wasn't any guarantee my letter would actually reach her. That was one thing that frustrated me about this world compared to my last one.

Anyway, I'd deal with that problem when it came up. If I didn't hear anything from her after spending a while in Odine, I'd just send her another letter. For the moment, the only thing I could do was keep walking. After all, I got carriage-sick easily.

I never ended up finding out while I was in Vilestorika, but I wondered if I'd also get seasick. The way a boat sways is completely different from something like a carriage, so maybe I would have been okay. That would greatly expand the range of lands I could visit in my travels. Next time I had a chance to visit Saurotay, I'd have to ask Dreeze to take me out on his boat to find out.

As I followed the road to the northeast, the wind changed. The western wind felt entirely different from the salty air blowing in off the sea. As if playing some kind of practical joke, the spirits of the wind let the western breeze carry them close to the ground before laughing and unleashing a powerful gust. I held the hat I wore tightly to my head so that I wouldn't lose it to their pranks.

The pleasant wind brought a smile to my face. If I had wings, it would have been more than enough to carry me into the sky. Then I would be able to travel to all kinds of places without worrying about carriage-sickness.

Of course, that was all idle dreaming. But as if guessing what I was thinking, the wind started pushing on my back. So with a bit of a running start, I leaped into the air, letting the spirits of the wind carry me forward. Naturally, being a high elf and not a bird, I couldn't get close to flying like that, but the spirits seemed to be enjoying themselves, so that was enough for me.

As I traveled leisurely down the road, I eventually heard the rattle of a

carriage coming up from behind me. I stepped off the road to let them pass, but the coachman slowed his horse.

“Hey, friend. Need a ride?” he asked me kindly. He was likely a merchant traveling from town to town. Two armed men sat next to the merchandise secured tightly to the carriage.

“I’m fine, thanks. I’m not very good with carriages, so I’m traveling on foot.”

With a nod and a wave, the coachman prompted his horse onward and left me behind. I had refused his offer because of my motion sickness, but his act of kindness still improved my mood. As I waved at the carriage retreating into the distance, the armed guards waved back at me.

They seemed like good people. With a prayer that a safe wind would follow them on their journey, I got back on the road to resume mine. The first city in the Alliance was not far off.



The southwesternmost nation of the Azueda Alliance was the Duchy of Travoya, a small city-state composed of the city of Janpemon and its surrounding villages. The Alliance was blessed with a mild climate and fertile ground, so with the large river and its tributaries running through, none of the nations found themselves wanting for food or water. It was truly a blessed land. That fertility made it possible for countless small nations to spring up and sustain themselves here.

When I approached Janpemon, the sky had started turning a deep red. The city itself was surrounded by what felt like an endless sea of wheat, the city’s specialty. The city among these fields in the glow of sunset appeared like a stone ship floating in a sea of gold.

That poetic description was a line I had stolen—er, quoted from a poet who used to live in the area. A traveling peddler I had met in the bar of a town I visited previously had told me the story. To my eyes, it looked like a plain stone city in a field of wheat, but knowing a few expressions like that gave one the illusion of having a tranquil heart.

There wasn’t much point trying to act cool when I was out walking alone

though, so I decided it was best to make it into the city before sunset. Since leaving the Forest Depths, and indeed leaving Ludoria, I had visited a number of cities and so had grown quite accustomed to the process of gaining entry. The Alliance was always wary of visitors from distant lands, and I would already stand out plenty, so I used my master blacksmith license to get inside.

I hadn't had a chance to visit a forge since leaving Ludoria, so my skill in blacksmithing had likely deteriorated somewhat. So while I didn't plan on staying in Janpemon for very long, I wanted to do a few blacksmithing jobs while I was there. Besides, doing some work in the Alliance would paint a better picture for the guards of the other cities than a wandering traveler with no history here.

Making my way into the city, I began where I always did, searching for an inn. The sun had already dipped below the horizon, and my stomach was grumbling relentlessly about reaching its limit. Unable to resist the scent of cooked food in the air, I found myself drawn to a nearby inn with a restaurant on its first floor.

I was planning on spending maybe a few weeks in Janpemon, but I didn't have to settle for the first inn I walked into. I'd stay the night here, and remain longer if all went well. Otherwise, I could find a place closer to the forge I'd end up borrowing.

"Hi, welcome! Dinner for one? Or are you planning on staying the night?" As I stepped inside, a girl that looked to be around ten years old called out to me. Though she seemed young to be working there, she already carried herself like an experienced worker, so she had likely grown up here.

"I'm planning on staying, but I'm pretty hungry too. So both, if that's okay."

The girl's face lit up at my words. As a child, I would have expected her to only worry about her work having increased, but she seemed genuinely happy in spite of how crowded the dining hall already was. She seemed like a good kid.

"Mooooom! We have another guest! Oh, right, a room for one is fifty coppers. Dinner is twelve, and breakfast is eight. Please sign your name here, if you don't mind."

Seeing her earnest demeanor brought a smile to my face. The price of the

room was on the cheaper side, and the meals were about average. I wondered if most of their earnings came from the restaurant. I asked for a single night and dinner, writing my name down in the ledger book.

“Acer... Mr. Acer, is it? Okay, I’ll take you to your room. You can leave your belongings there and then come down for dinner when you’re ready. Oh right, water for a bath and laundry are five coppers each.”

I nodded as she hurriedly added to the list. I would probably have a bath after dinner, and if I stayed here much longer than a day, I’d probably make use of their laundry service as well. It was hardly a luxurious hotel, but the atmosphere wasn’t bad.

The girl led me up to the second floor, occasionally turning back to steal a glance at me. When she realized I’d noticed, she waved her hands as if flustered.

“U-Ummm, Mr. Acer, you’re an...elf?” she asked hesitantly. It seemed she thought it was rude to ask her guests questions like that. Realizing what she had just said, her face immediately paled. But I really didn’t mind.

“That’s right, I’m an elf. Is this the first time you’ve seen one?” I replied, patting her on the head to calm her down. Even when I was in the capital of a large nation like Ludoria, I’d only met a small handful of elves. I imagined there weren’t any in a small city-state like this.

“Uh, I’ve seen one once, from far away. But this is the first time we’ve had one stay at the inn. Ah, here is your room. Please don’t lose the key,” she said with a blush.

As I opened the door and stepped into my room, the girl went back to her work downstairs. While I wouldn’t say it was particularly old-fashioned, the room seemed quite seasoned. The bed was about as good as I would have expected from such a price. But the room had been kept quite clean, and the chest by the window was decorated with a vase holding a single flower, displaying the care the innkeepers took. The lock on the door was sturdy, so my first impression was positive overall. I wouldn’t mind staying here for a while.

The decision would have to wait until after dinner, though. It seemed the food was the real selling point of this inn, so I couldn’t make a thorough judgment

until I'd tried it. After checking over the room briefly, I left my things inside, locked the door, and headed back to the dining hall.



Likened to a stone ship on a sea of wheat, the city of Janpemon was overflowing with wheat products. While the fertile ground around Travoya was nothing unique in the Alliance, each nation specialized in different kinds of produce, like apples and grapes. Of course, wheat was a staple food, so it was grown everywhere. But that aside, with their specialty in wheat, the residents of Travoya had done quite a bit of research on the best way to serve it as food.

Returning to the dining hall with a very empty stomach, I was greeted with a plate of pasta in white sauce. The added slices of bacon tied it together into a rather substantial meal. Once the pasta was done, I had a small piece of bread to clean up the leftover sauce on my plate, and a glass of wine. The amount of flour I was eating was enough to make me laugh, but frankly speaking, everything tasted quite good. The food all went down easily, but it was surprisingly filling and left me quite satisfied.

As I was enjoying my wine in the aftermath of the meal, the serving girl approached me with a bright smile. "I'll take your empty plate for you. Did you enjoy dinner, Mr. Acer?" I nodded and asked for a bath, paying for it together with my meal. I would have felt bad for making her carry that much water upstairs for me, so I decided to ask for it while I was here and then carry it up myself.

Satisfied with the meal, I was happy to make this my place of residence for my time in the city.

The next day, I paid a visit to Travoya's blacksmithing guild. I was met politely, if with a bit of surprise. I couldn't really blame them. It was rare enough to see an elf in a small city-state like this, let alone a blacksmith. They gave me permission to borrow their equipment, so I immediately asked for some work.

Of course, even being a master blacksmith, one couldn't just walk into town and expect to be given important jobs. I would need to build up a level of trust in the city before I got anything significant. As such, my first job was simply

creating ten iron spear points for the city guard within a week.

The guild itself was willing to pay for any excess that I ended up making. They would also cover the cost of the materials, fuel for the forge, and fees for using the equipment, so I would end up taking home one silver per spearhead I made. It was a little on the lower side, but as a wandering blacksmith that had just walked into town, I expected as much. This wasn't like my situation back in Ludoria, where I had the clout of being taught by a dwarven master.

To keep on schedule, I'd need to make a little less than two spearheads a day, but there was no upper limit on how many they'd buy, so I didn't have to hold back. If I followed the quota exactly, I'd end up with ten silvers after a week of work, so I wouldn't be left with much after paying my living expenses. But if I made two or three times that amount, things would be a little different.

At first glance, the sample they provided me to work off of didn't seem very good, so I decided to make as many as I could at a slightly higher quality. As it was my first time at a forge in so long, I met the task with great vigor and excitement. The heat of the forge brought a pleasant sweat, and with each swing of the hammer, I could feel my focus sharpening.

My skills hadn't dulled quite as much as I had feared, and the fire spirits living in the forge cheered me on with sprays of sparks. These sparks were hot enough to hurt, of course, so I wasn't terribly grateful for that kind of encouragement.

By evening, I was left with five spearheads which lacked only the final sharpening and polish. I would finish them up and deliver them the next day. That would eat up a bit of my time, so I would probably only be able to make four spearheads that day. I could probably go faster once I was a bit more accustomed to the work.

While I toiled, members of the blacksmithing guild took turns coming to observe me.

Maybe it was just because of my rarity in the profession, but I heard nothing but unadulterated praise from them. Being so openly praised was a bit embarrassing, but I was happy to receive it nonetheless.

As I immersed myself in my task, I found myself reminiscing about the jeering

Master Damned Dwarf always gave me as he watched me work. It felt a bit strange, since my sense of time was a bit different from others. It didn't feel like it had been that long since we parted ways.

While I was carried along by that sentiment, the members of the blacksmithing guild saw me off on my way back to the inn. I had been pretty absorbed in my work, but once I was a bit more accustomed to it, I would be able to work faster and speak with them more. Though I was perfectly happy with the food my inn provided, I also wanted to try the kind of restaurants only the locals knew about. I'd be happy if they'd go with me.

What should be for dinner tonight? I'd love something like a white stew...

The pleasant breeze carried the lingering heat of the forge off of me. Despite the fatigue of a long day's work, my feet felt light. It had really been a satisfying day. I was sure I'd sleep well that night.



The land of the former Azuedan Empire, now known as the Azueda Alliance, was very fertile. Janpemon specialized in the cultivation of wheat, while the neighboring city-states grew things like fruit trees. From the sauce used in my meal that night, I could tell they also raised livestock.

As it turned out, there was plenty for me to eat besides meals. With flour, milk, and butter alongside fruit, the first thing anyone would think of was dessert. They obviously had sugar and honey, but their value made them rather expensive, so they weren't used very much. Instead, dried fruits were used to sweeten their creations.

Speaking of which, wheat malt could be used to make a sweet syrup, couldn't it? I seemed to recall that was the case from my previous life, but I never knew the process by which it was done.

At any rate, the next day I was out snacking around town. My guide was the serving girl at the inn, Nonna. Her shift having just come to an end, the promise of desserts was more than enough to convince her to accompany me. Luring a ten-year-old girl out with sweets would have definitely become quite an incident in my past life, but without having spent even a week in Janpemon yet, I couldn't find my way around town without a guide.

Six days of work, one day off. That was one of the habits I had developed while working in Vistcourt. Work only long enough that it doesn't leave you exhausted for the next day's work. Eat well, sleep well. Take a nap every once in a while.

I could only maintain my focus for five or six hours a day, so everything I did was to create conditions where I could perform at my peak in that time frame. By the end of the sixth day, I had thirty-two spearheads to turn in. Apparently they had never expected me to produce over thirty in less than a week, so my declaration to take the seventh day off was met with sighs of relief.

I couldn't judge the balance of a spear just by its tip alone, so I was hoping they'd put me in charge of making the whole thing. Still, I couldn't complain about what work they decided to give me. I was sure they'd have something new for me the next day.

"Mmm, mmm! It's so good!" A bright smile lit Nonna's face as she stuffed it with cake covered in whipped cream and dried fruit. I was a bit surprised to find whipped cream on the confections they made here. Some kind of flavoring or sweetener was needed to make a good whipped cream, so it must have required large amounts of fruit juice or sugar. In short, it was extremely expensive. I had paid for the cake Nonna was eating now in silver.

Apparently this was her first time trying it, so she was bubbling over with excitement. It was pretty good, after all. I hadn't eaten something so sweet in a while, so the experience made me long for some tea. It seemed that culture hadn't made its way here yet.

I extended a hand, wiping the whipped cream off Nonna's nose.



Though a little embarrassed, she couldn't help but look longingly at the cream left on my finger. Eating it at this point seemed a bit improper, though, so I used a cloth to wipe it off. After regaining her senses, she dove back into the dessert as if to pretend nothing had happened, her face suddenly all smiles again.

"It's so delicious!" she cried out again. She was really an interesting creature. I suspected there wasn't much in her head except what had just happened the moment before. I couldn't help but find the sincerity of her happiness infectious.

Similar to my experience in Saurotay, I was reminded how having a wide range of foods to eat was a good thing. The ups and downs of eating something new every day were far better for the heart than repeating the same old meal day in and day out, just like knowing that one line about the stone ship in a sea of golden wheat. That was probably what people meant when they said "culture." Of course, not everyone looked for that kind of richness in their lives.

"Hey, did you hear?" I overheard a shopper speaking from across the store. The unease in their voice had caught my attention. "Darottei attacked the fortress on North Zaile's border."

North Zaile was the northernmost nation in the Alliance, consisting of two cities. There used to be a South Zaile as well, but it had been absorbed by its northern neighbor. This nation was famous as a gathering spot for mercenaries and soldiers and was colloquially known as Azueda's Great Northern Wall.

Darottei was a separate nation of nomads from the east who had crushed the existing kingdom and then set up a rule of their own. The descendants of those nomads became the new ruling class, while those of the natives became an underclass, with a large disparity between them. On top of that, Darottei was a warmongering nation that loved to battle and pillage, especially famed for their powerful cavalry. They were a difficult people to deal with. I couldn't understand why they didn't just turn to fighting monsters if they were so obsessed with combat.

"The Alliance might call an assembly soon." That brought an end to the conversation.

For the moment, it was just a rumor with no evidence behind it. But for ordinary citizens this far south to be spreading rumors like that, word had to have traveled quite a distance from the north. Even if this wasn't entirely accurate, there had to be some truth to it.

At some point, I realized Nonna was staring with concern at me as I had been lost in thought.

“What’s wrong, Mr. Acer?”

I deflected the question by cutting down the middle of my leftover cake and sliding half onto her plate. There was no point in worrying such a young girl about something like war. The gleam in her eyes assured me that I had avoided the issue for now. I would have to talk to the members of the blacksmithing guild later to find out more.



The next day, I was tasked with making the best sword I could manage, no matter the cost. They wanted to use it as an example piece for the other blacksmiths to improve their own skills. It seemed that my skill had been recognized by the blacksmiths in Travoya. Though it was certainly an honor, that honor came with a suitable amount of pressure.

After the rumors I'd heard the day before, I asked about the war. It was in fact true that Darottei had attacked the northern reaches of the Alliance. The conflict was still limited to small skirmishes, so while North Zaile's army had been deployed, it wasn't clear whether the Alliance would hold an assembly or not.

In any case, there wasn't anything I could do about it. I was sure they already had specialists making equipment for the army, and while they would need blacksmiths to replace and maintain their gear during the war effort, it wasn't something they could turn to a wandering blacksmith like me for.

I wasn't particularly excited about the idea of getting involved in a war either, but hearing that something big was happening nearby while I sat around and did nothing left me feeling a bit antsy. I'm sure curiosity killed as many high elves as it did cats, but unfortunately that's just the kind of person I was. But regardless of my worries, I had no obligation, reason, or right to get involved. I

had been given a rather important job, so for now that's where I needed to turn my attention.

Any kind of sword would be fine for this task, so I decided to make one that I was most familiar with: the single-edged straight sword of the Yosogi School. In order to prepare myself for such a critical job, I borrowed the roof of the blacksmithing guild.

If I was going to make a Yosogi School sword, I needed to brush up on my swordsmanship. There were nine techniques in total: diagonal downward slashes, both left and right; diagonal upward slashes, left and right; left and right horizontal slashes; a straight downward slash; a straight upward slash; and finally, a forward stab. The sword needed a shape, balance, and center of gravity perfectly suited for those movements.

To give an easy example outside of the Yosogi School, a greatsword's weight added a lot of power to a downward swing, but hindered one's ability to strike upward. With only one sword in hand, a weapon made for the Yosogi School needed to accommodate for all of those techniques. It was a rather challenging task.

I spent a good deal of time swinging that sword, trying to discover the ideal shape, weight, and balance. Of course, I didn't discover any such thing. Though the image floated up in my mind as if from behind a bamboo screen, it receded the moment I reached for it.

However, this practice lit something of a fire in me, demanding that at least some aspect of the image in my head manifest into the real world. That was the focus I needed to make a sword for the Yosogi School.

The other blacksmiths in the guild watched with confusion, but I didn't pay them the slightest attention. The only ones who could understand me now were Oswald and Kaeha, my two masters. If those two understood me, that was enough. Or rather, that would make me ecstatic. Everyone else could just wait to see the results. I would make a perfect weapon, one that anyone would be able to appreciate.

I spent the next three weeks working on that sword, or eighteen days of work

and three days off to be precise. All of my energy poured through that hammer into the steel, so for the first few days I was met with a look of concern from Nonna as I returned to the inn totally exhausted. She understood well enough that I was working hard, and so she did all kinds of favors for me at the inn. She'd bring up the hot water for my bath to my room herself and put as much food on my plate as she could without getting scolded by her mother. These were all small, insignificant things, but her quiet encouragement filled me with determination all the same.

Finally, after swinging the completed sword nine times, I was satisfied enough to hand it in. The members of the guild unanimously praised the weapon, but their accolades fell on deaf ears.

I was totally burned out. I felt like I didn't want to move for three days, and I wouldn't be surprised if I stayed that long in my room. I just wanted to wallow in the exhaustion and satisfaction of a job well done.

The pay was to be determined after an extensive evaluation of the sword, but I didn't care about that anymore. Once I had recovered a bit, I'd probably be happier with their evaluation and grateful for the money. Maybe I'd take Nonna out for cake again. My brain was craving the sweetness of that whipped cream. And more than that, I was quite indebted to her. I was sure I could take her out for some sweets without getting in trouble.

However, the fact that Oswald would never appraise that sword, and that Kaeha would never get to swing it, left me feeling a bit sad. Either would have been far greater a reward than any amount of gold.



Satisfied with the work I had done in the city, and with the extraordinary payment of ten large golds for the sword in my pocket, I soon felt that I had stayed in Janpemon a little too long. So after finishing the sword, I took three days to sleep. I spent the fourth day touring around the city with Nonna and then, feeling fully recovered, made plans to leave.

I had spent quite a bit more time here than expected, so I was in a bit of a hurry. If I stuck around any longer, any correspondence from Airena might miss me. I didn't want to think about what she would do if that happened and she

started to worry about me.

In order to make it to Odine, I would have to pass through a number of other towns. I couldn't spend much time in any of them, but passing through without at least taking a look around would be a waste. If I wanted the chance to see anything in them, then my stay in Janpemon had to end.

Though a little sad to hear I was leaving, as a daughter of a family running an inn, Nonna was well accustomed to saying goodbye. Knowing that it definitely wouldn't be the last time we met, she said, "See you again!" with a bright smile.

That alone made me want to come back and stay at this inn the next time I was in the area. I had to say, she was quite the saleswoman.

And so I left Janpemon behind, heading northeast from Travoya toward Odine.

One of the unfortunate drawbacks to traveling in this world was that you had to ask around to find out how to get anywhere. It wasn't like they had never heard of maps, but any useful ones were kept under strict supervision by the government. There was no way a wanderer like me would be allowed to look at them.

Of course, after spending a long time in a place, such as a decade of living in Ludoria, I could get an idea of the location and relative sizes of the surrounding countries. I had known enough to cut a path through the woods and force my way through Paulogia into Vilestorika.

But if I tried the same thing in the Alliance, I would definitely get lost. Though the roads which twisted and turned to avoid forests and mountains felt tedious at times, following them properly was probably the fastest way to travel.

The road would carry me northeast to a kingdom composed of a single city known as Ardeno. Both the nation and the city shared the same name, making it quite easy to remember. Heading north from Ardeno would take me to a place known as the Water Jug Kingdom, the city of Folka in the Republic of Tsia. A ship could take me north across the lake to another Tsian city called Luronte. The lake itself was called Lake Tsia, with the republic formed around it taking the name as a vow to live alongside it. And finally, taking a road northeast from Luronte would bring me to Odine.

Learning the names of all these countries and cities made this sound like quite the journey, but it wasn't actually that much distance to cover. It would take me a while since I was walking, but at most it was only two or three days between each city on foot. If riding a carriage, one could make the trip in a single day.

But considering my ailment, I'd never take that option.

Somewhere around the city of Ardeno, I found an orchard of apple trees. Ardeno was a country renowned for its fruit. I found a number of people working in the orchard, tending to the trees. Noticing my curiosity, one of the trees near the road asked if I needed an apple. In truth, I was quite thirsty after walking so long. So while I was grateful for the offer, I shook my head with a laugh.

From the tree's perspective, these apples were a part of itself, and while that was certainly correct, I was sure the farmers would have different feelings on the matter. Even if I had permission from the tree itself, I'd be no more than a thief in their eyes. There was an incredible gulf between the common sense of high elves and humans around here. Of course, the same went for humans and plants too.

But even so, a huge number of trees led a gentle life here, tended to by the hands of humans. Seeing that made me strangely happy.

But at that time, the wind carried the sound of a thud and a scream from beyond the rows of trees. One of the trees had been snapped, knocked over by a tremendous impact. Meanwhile, the giant boar that had knocked it over was happily munching away on its newfound apples.

Though the apple trees here felt a little slimmer than the ones in the forest I was used to, they weren't so small that an ordinary boar could knock one over in a single strike. And yet it had easily snapped the tree in two.

"I-It's a greedboar! Someone, go to the city and call the adventurers!"

Yes, according to the cries, this was a greedboar. In other words, it was an enormous monster, incomparable in size and strength to an ordinary wild hog.



What we called “monsters” referred to wild animals that had transformed due to the influence of a magical energy called mana, as well as their offspring. In most cases they became larger and stronger, but there was nothing inherently evil about them.

Mana itself was naturally occurring, so you could say that a monster was just an animal that had evolved through exposure to mana. But although they weren’t necessarily malevolent, many monsters were prone to violence due to their increased strength. Realizing that other animals couldn’t stand against them anymore, they became proud and belligerent. So to protect the daily lives of people everywhere, adventurers who specialized in culling the numbers of these monsters began to appear.

That said, it didn’t appear these adventurers would make it in time. They would have been fine if they just fled, but the farmhands couldn’t just leave their trees to be destroyed, and this must have aggravated the greedboar. Pausing its meal for a moment, it turned furious eyes on the workers and stomped the ground in warning. It wasn’t hard to imagine what kind of tragedy would result if the boar decided to attack.

Reluctantly, I dropped my belongings to the ground and pulled out my bow, nocking an arrow. The greedboar hadn’t done anything particularly wrong. It had wandered away from the forest out of curiosity and coincidentally come across an orchard full of delicious food. Asking an animal that had no concept of human civilization to *not* eat the food in front of it would just be unreasonable. But that didn’t mean I could leave the boar to do as it wished.

If, for example, a monster had attacked me while I was traveling, I could have found a way to avoid it and slip away. In fact, whenever I felt the presence of monsters in my travels, I would find a place to hide and wait for them to pass by. But the only way to prevent it from attacking these farmhands was to put it down.

My arrow whistled through the air, finding its mark dead center on the boar’s left foreleg. Against the thick hide of a monster, even iron-tipped arrows could fail to penetrate if they hit at a bad angle. But the arrow I had used was special, its arrowhead crafted from the fang of a grand wolf. With a skilled archer, it would have no issue piercing bone.

With its leg paralyzed by the sudden pain, the greedboar's charge was interrupted and it crashed to the ground. Rage flashed through its eyes at the one who had dared to hurt it. But looking back at me had sealed the creature's fate.

The second arrow I fired struck the greedboar in the forehead, sinking deep into its brain. No matter how robust the monster was, destroying the brain would put an end to it. With nothing to instruct the body to move, its heart and lungs would stop.

There were some monsters...or rather, there were even some animals that had multiple brains, so I couldn't relax quite yet. But as far as I could tell, the collapsed greedboar had stopped breathing. By the way, if you're curious what kind of animals I meant, the octopus I ate in Saurotay—known as eightleg in this world—is one example. Apparently each of their legs has its own brain.

Anyway, back to my new race against the clock. I had killed the greedboar. Though it was entirely to save the lives of the farmhands, it would be too sad for its life to end uselessly like that. I had a responsibility to skin and butcher it, eat its meat myself, and let it become a part of me. Okay, maybe that was just an excuse, but either way I was going to eat it. Its tanned hide would also be good for making a cloak or boots.

That was the way I did things. If a monster I killed was edible, I would eat it. And even if it wasn't, I would take whatever resources I could from it to get some use out of its death. I didn't want anything to die in vain. I would have to hurry with processing the boar's body to ensure that.

In reality, nothing could ever go to waste. When a living creature died, its soul would return to the flow of reincarnation, and even if its body was left to rot, it would decompose and nourish the earth. That was the same for people, animals, and monsters. From the world's perspective, there was no meaning in any of their deaths, but they all still contributed in some small way to nature.

That was the perspective of the spirits, at least. From their point of view, my motto of using as much as I could was just me being sentimental. I could accept that I was different from the others in not wanting to leave things at that. I

imagine the other high elves in the Forest Depths would view monsters and humans the same way and wouldn't even consider getting involved in a dispute between the two.

“Wh-Whoa! Thanks, buddy! You really saved us there!”

The farmhands being threatened by the greedboar finally caught up to the situation, running to me to shower me with thanks. Putting away my bow and picking up my belongings, I started toward the carcass.

“I'm just glad you're safe. Um, sorry to be rude, but I'd like to take apart the body and cool the meat, so if you could show me where I could find some water...and if you could help me carry it there, I would be grateful.” I was equally glad that they weren't hurt, but as shameless as it might have been, I followed up that celebration with a small request.

I didn't think I could carry the body by myself. The greedboar had been rampaging through an orchard, and I doubted the farmhands would be happy to see me dissecting an animal and getting blood everywhere while they tried to tend to the trees.

“Got it. I'll go grab a cart, so wait here a minute. It's a big one, huh? We better get to work right away.” Not only did they agree to help, they even offered to get me a cart. As thanks, I would split the meat from the boar with them. It wasn't like I could eat it all myself anyway.

To make it through the greedboar's tough hide, I pulled out my knife, carved from the same grand wolf fangs as my arrows. I guessed dinner tonight would be greedboar steak.

Though I was looking forward to having some boar hot pot, it didn't seem like there was any miso to be had here. A mountain inn, hot springs, wild vegetables with boar meat in a hot pot... I began to wonder if I could find such a luxury in this world. The world was big, and a high elf lived a long time, so if I could, I wanted to search it out.



“Eat your fill, Acer! We owe you our lives!”

One of the farmhands, a man named Adjilte, had invited me to his home that night, where his wife cooked dinner for us. She prepared an extravagant meal, crowned at the center with a plate of greedboar spare rib with an apple sauce. Apple had the effect of softening the meat and covering its smell. And of course, above all, it was delicious.

We were also served apple pie, minced meat pie courtesy of the greedboar, and what surprised me the most, an apple soup. The meal was rounded off with apple cider to drink, enhancing the sweetness of everything else. It really felt like I was being pampered.

I had been invited here after turning down the reward the farmhands offered to pay for killing the greedboar. I wasn't an adventurer, so I hadn't done it for money. Whether they were rich or poor, if I saw someone about to be killed by a monster, I'd do anything in my power to help them. Though I suppose if it was someone who clearly deserved it, or if saving that person would leave me or others around them worse off, I might have to turn a blind eye.

I recognized that adventurers saved people's lives for money, and actually I thought that was a good thing. But I wasn't an adventurer, so I hadn't killed the greedboar for money. That's all I wanted to say. I wasn't a professional monster slayer; I was just a wandering hunter that had come across the monster by chance.

But the farmhands, and particularly Adjilte who acted as their spokesperson, wouldn't hear of it. If I was going to refuse payment, he demanded I at least stay with him so he could treat me while I was in town.

It wasn't the hot pot in the mountains I had been looking for, but the warm hospitality his family provided me was superb. The flavor of the greedboar spare rib was quite strong, but the apple sauce helped reduce the greasy texture.

The combo was a bit of an acquired taste, but I was quite fond of it. Apples were very close in flavor to apuas, so they were quite popular among elves. But being prepared like this brought out a whole new side of the fruit to be admired.

Careful not to be rude, I passionately dug into the meal before me. Ever since

starting my journey, I had come across so much delicious food. This really was true happiness.

“Ha ha ha, I’m glad my wife’s cooking is to your taste. We had no idea what kind of food an elf would like,” Adjilte said, his wife laughing along with him. I ate pretty much anything, so if they were interested in finding out about the unbalanced diet that elves and high elves liked, I wouldn’t be much help. That said, I imagined most elves would rejoice at cooking that used apples like this.

Judging by the feast he provided me and the interior of his house, I guessed that Adjilte was a man of some wealth. Apparently the fruit tree business was rather profitable. That meant the city of Ardeno, and indeed the whole country, was likely fairly prosperous. At least, as far as countries go.

The next day, I thanked Adjilte’s family once more and made my way out of Ardeno. They tried numerous times to get me to stay longer, but as strange as it might sound, I felt it was better for me to leave while they were still happy to have me stay. I didn’t want to repeat the experience of relying on others for food and shelter too often, and I knew full well that indulging in that lifestyle could lead to long-term dependency.

But above all else, I wanted to do something with the greedboar pelt I had acquired. According to Adjilte, there was a village named Palnore near the city of Folka, my next destination. It belonged to the Tsian Republic, not to the Kingdom of Ardeno.

The village sat on the banks of a river flowing out of Lake Tsia, the body of water from which the Republic had taken its name. Apparently Palnore used their easy access to the river for dyeing cloth and tanning leather.

I had heard somewhere that part of the process of tanning involved leaving the skin immersed in a river. I had probably picked that up while working as a blacksmith in Ludoria.

I had quite a bit of experience myself using leather that had already been tanned for making sword grips, shields, and inner padding for metal armor as well as sewing it into leather armor itself. Once I found a way to get the greedboar hide tanned, all I would need was some time to figure out how I

wanted to use it. With such a large and tough pelt, I could find countless ways to put it to use.

Palnore was a full day's walk from Ardeno. From Palnore to Folka would take another day. After having someone tan the hide for me, I stayed one night in Palnore and then set off again. I was actually quite interested in the tanning process, but the generational secrets behind the process were much more difficult to squeeze out of a small town like this. I was already having them do quite a bit of work for me, so I didn't want to trouble them any further.

If I were going to seriously pursue the craft, it would be better to find a workshop in a larger city and take on a proper apprenticeship. After living for well over a decade in the human world, I had learned at least that much.

Besides that, I also had to worry about time. Proper tanning was a process that could take months. I didn't have time to sit around and wait for that...at least, not while in the middle of my journey. I had to prioritize making it to Odine, the Land of Magic. Once I made it there and found a place to stay, I could consider coming back to Palnore after a few months or hiring a merchant or adventurer to come retrieve the finished product for me.

Reluctant as I was to part with it, I had no choice but to look forward to our reunion. I left the greedboar hide in Palnore and continued on my way.



“Wow, that's amazing. And this isn't the sea?”

Moved by the sight of an inland lake large enough that I couldn't see across to the other side, I dipped my hands into the water and washed my face. As expected, there was no saltiness to the water, cementing the reality that this really was a freshwater lake.

The main source of income for the Tsian Republic was moving freight across its titular lake or up and down the rivers that flowed to and from it. They couldn't reach *anywhere* in the Alliance, but the Republic nevertheless shouldered the majority of long-distance distribution within it. The grain from Travoya and the fruit from Ardeno all traveled by river to Tsia, where it was then shipped across the entire Alliance. And so Tsia became a popular relay

point for all kinds of trade.

Following the river up from Palnore until I ran into the lake, I then took a road following the lake for two hours before reaching the city of Folka. I used my master blacksmith's license and a record of work provided by Travoya's blacksmithing guild to gain entrance into the city. While the license alone would be sufficient to gain recognition as a skilled wandering blacksmith, the record of work showed I could also be useful to the Alliance. In short, it made me more trustworthy. Not every job could produce a record of work like this, so it also served as something like a letter of thanks from the blacksmithing guild. Though only within the Alliance itself, it would serve as a great boost to my ID.

The tax to enter Folka was a meager ten coppers, and I wouldn't need to pay again if I were to take a ship from here to Luronte. Travelers I met at a bar in Folka where I had stopped to eat grumbled that the cost was pushed forward onto the fee for the ferry. While I had no way of proving it, it sounded reasonable enough to me.

But I suspected they had reduced the cost of coming and going in an attempt to encourage trade. Reducing what was effectively a tariff would increase the flow of goods, the amount of money that came into the city, and in the end, the amount of tax that could be collected. For a place that relied so heavily on shipping to make its money, it sounded like a logical course of action.

In any case, I had no intention of staying long in Folka. Up until now, I had avoided the ships plying the rivers out of fear of seasickness...but Lake Tsia was far too large to avoid. A ship leaving Folka in the morning would reach Luronte by evening. However, fending off the monsters of the lake was much more difficult after nightfall, so ships only left in the morning.

The cost of a voyage from Folka to Luronte was indeed rather expensive at three silvers. I could understand why those travelers I'd eaten with had complained. But the cost was hard to argue with, considering the number of rowers needed to move quickly enough and the armed escort that had to accompany us. Even if the price were cheaper, a slower ship or a lack of protection could lead to the whole craft sinking under monster attacks. If one adamantly refused to pay the fee, there was always the option of taking a detour around the lake, as extraordinarily long as that would take.

Once I had decided to take the ship, it was all up to my guts. After paying the fee and boarding the ship, I was guided to a seat at the center. Monsters would attack from the sides of the boat, so travelers were gathered in the center for safety. Even before leaving port, the ship swayed a little in the water, but I felt no sign of any seasickness.

When the time came to depart, the heavy sound of a drum at the back of the ship filled the air. As one, the rowers dipped their oars into the water, moving along with the rhythm. Through the efforts of the powerful men's rowing, the ship gradually picked up enough speed to create a steady breeze over the ship. It felt a lot faster than I had imagined, making it quite a fun experience.

The sound of the wind spirits' merriment filled my ears, the cold lake wind felt refreshing and pleasant, and the scenery was beautiful. The sight of sunlight reflecting off the lake was something I thought I'd never get tired of. Maybe that feeling of release was what kept the motion sickness at bay, to the point I didn't feel it at all.

The rhythmic beating of the drum continued without pause. Apparently the drum had a purpose beyond just providing a rhythm for the rowers. It also served to ward off cautious monsters and draw more aggressive ones to the stern of the ship. The drummer had to be exceptionally brave and strong and was celebrated for protecting the rest of the ship from surprise attacks. Without the drumming, monsters might choose to attack the rowers or the bottom of the ship itself. It wasn't hard to imagine the ship sinking in that situation.

So while the drummer worked to draw the attention of the monsters, they also attracted the respect of the crew. The monsters' attacks being focused on the stern made it easier for the guards to protect the ship as well. Protecting an entire ship was a considerable task, but since they knew the drummer would be the primary target, keeping watch became much easier.

That said, completing the journey without being molested by monsters was far preferable, so the drummer and the rowers continued their work without pause. Around the time the sky was turning red with sunset, the ship reached

the harbor in Luronte.

As Folka's twin, the construction of this town was much the same. The two cities had been built with each other in mind, one on either side of the lake. While public places like the port and town hall were a given, even the warehouses and shipyards had been built in the exact same way in the exact same places. It lent a feeling of eccentricity to the pair of towns. Even the inn in Luronte was in the same place as the one I had stayed at in Folka.

As such, there weren't many new sights for me in Luronte, so after spending the night I set off for Odine. If I hadn't spent so long in Janpemon, I could have enjoyed my surroundings a bit more, but I had no regrets. Looking back, I had thoroughly enjoyed this journey.

In the distance, I could make out some tall spires surrounded by a large city wall. It was like the mages and archmages of the Alliance had gone out of the way to announce their presence here by building huge spires on their homes.

I had finally reached the Land of Magic, the city of Odine. My journey's end was right in front of me.

Chapter 5 — The Blacksmith and the Mage, Birds of a Feather

I feel like I've mentioned this before, but the nation of Odine and the city which shared its name were founded by the Alliance to be a place of magic. Quite some time ago, before the cities of the Alliance declared independence, this land was ruled by the Azuedan Empire. As with most nations of its size, the empire founded numerous academies as institutions to further the pursuit of magic.

However, before the fall of the empire, rampant authoritarianism in these academies led to a decline in their ability to study and research. With the empire itself on the verge of collapse, there was no way the system the academies built would survive such an upheaval.

So as the cities of the empire declared independence one after another, the academies were dissolved. Learning from past mistakes, the Alliance reserved an entire city for the study of magic, leaving it open for everyone. And so Odine was built, funded and maintained by other members of the Alliance. Being so reliant on outside help for its survival, it was relatively welcoming of visitors compared to other nations.

Other academies typically required citizenship and either a huge tuition fee or association with a noble family to permit one to enroll as a student. Of course, not just anyone could learn magic in Odine. Learning magic still required a sufficient amount of mana in one's body and the talent to control it. If one couldn't pass the tests, even being in Odine wasn't enough to learn magic.

So after I arrived in Odine, I spent a night resting before heading to the city hall to take an aptitude test. The fantastical sound of taking a "magic aptitude test" had me excited from the start. But what would I do if they told me I had no aptitude at all? I hadn't even considered the possibility before, so I was beginning to get nervous.

In all honesty, I knew very little about magic in this world. You might think it

absurd for me to travel so far despite not knowing anything, but about ninety percent of my reason for coming here was simple admiration.

From what I gathered, “magic” referred to the process of using techniques called “rituals” to manipulate and instigate changes in mana within the body to elicit a desired phenomenon. The explanation was a bit hard to understand, but I imagined the person I heard it from was only repeating what they had heard from someone else.

There were four types of supernatural skills in this world that I knew of, what we would have referred to as “magic” in my past life.

The first was Spirit Arts, borrowing the powers of the spirits of nature.

The second was miracles invoked by either an intense, refined force of will or resolute faith. This was referred to as Divine Arts or Psychic Arts.

The third was using mana within one’s body through rituals to do things, which was what this world called magic.

The fourth used the forces of nature to create phenomena instead of one’s own power and was known as Mystic Arts.

Explaining the differences between all of them is a lot of work, but in short, magic was the closest of the four to being a practical skill. Spirit Arts generally just meant asking the spirits to do something for you, and from what I’d seen of Divine Arts from my friend Martena, it was something like ESP or psychic abilities. The Mystic Arts were only practiced by an extremely small collection of people who lived in the far east, so I didn’t know anything about them but their name.

When I told the clerk at city hall what I wanted, he was incredibly surprised. He was quite a veteran there, but apparently I was the first elf he had ever seen apply for the aptitude test. He seemed to believe I was the first one since the founding of Odine itself. Elves visiting Odine at all was a pretty rare occurrence.

Out of curiosity I asked about the dwarves. The clerk himself had seen three dwarves come through for testing, and according to the records there had been more than ten come through since the founding of the city.

I already knew of relics, tools with magic rituals engraved on them that could create magical phenomena just by pouring mana into them. The dwarves had come here to learn magic so they could apply that process to the weapons and armor they made. Unfortunately, only two dwarves that had applied here showed enough aptitude to learn, and neither were in the city now. One had left some decades ago, and the other had followed suit within the past few years.

It appeared making relics wasn't something most mages considered a valuable use of their time. Using a relic required pouring one's mana into the inscribed ritual, so it required a degree of both mana and talent to operate. You basically needed to be capable of learning magic on your own, so they weren't any help to ordinary people. Most mages seemed to think that rather than spending their time crafting relics, it was faster to just use the magic themselves.

It really was such a shame. Just hearing the story left me wanting to create a magic sword.

While we were talking, the clerk handed me a pair of metal batons made from some metal I didn't recognize—that's right, a metal that I, a master blacksmith, didn't recognize!—and instructed me to push the ends together. As I brought them close to each other, sparks started shooting out of their ends.

The clerk nodded, satisfied. Apparently that was enough for him to discern something about my aptitude for magic.

He explained that the batons were made to draw out the holder's mana, so the sparks flying had been caused by the mana inside me. Those who didn't have a talent for manipulating their internal mana, or whose mana was too solid, wouldn't get those sparks. And even if it could pull out some mana, sparks still would not appear if the concentration was too low. Furthermore, by looking at the size of the sparks and the distance between the batons when they had started, they could determine the fluidity and amount of a person's mana.

In short, yes, I possessed the aptitude necessary to learn magic.

Woo!

Now I was excited. Honestly, I was super happy. So much so that I found myself shaking the clerk's hand without thinking about it.

I was really interested in the batons used in the test as well. I tried to buy them off him, but the clerk seemed really troubled by the offer. I had to give up after about five minutes of haggling. I was extremely curious about them, but if I studied magic in Odine, I'd probably come across this mysterious metal again.

In the end, the clerk had this to say.

"The power of magic is far less potent than what spirits are capable of. So for a spirit caller like you to try and learn magic... That will drum up a lot of jealousy and animosity. But this is the Land of Magic, built exactly so you can learn magic here. If you run into any problems, come and talk to me about it. You're welcome anytime, Acer."

And so my life in Odine, and my first steps toward becoming a mage, had begun.



Back when I parted ways with my master in blacksmithing, Oswald, he had asked me what I planned on doing next. When I told him that I was interested in learning swordsmanship and magic, I remember him saying something like "You want to learn magic when you already have the power of the spirits?" I didn't understand what he meant at the time, but thinking back on it now, he must have had some knowledge about magic and Spirit Arts.

My first week in Odine was full of the experiences the clerk at the city hall had warned me about. Whenever I approached an archmage about learning magic, they all responded with various degrees of hostility. Both Oswald and Kaeha had initially rejected me when I first asked them to teach me, but I was willing to dig in and keep begging them because they didn't show any hostility toward me.

Of course there was more to it than that. I also admired their skill and felt a kind of fate bringing us together. But had they hated me despite all that, I wouldn't have even considered asking to learn under them.

Probably. I think. Maybe.

At any rate, that meant I wasn't able to find a teacher here.

In Odine, there were two primary ways to learn magic. The first, which I had just given up on, was to study under another mage. If a mage began training a skilled student, they would be granted the title of archmage and its attendant honors, a symbol of the contribution they had made to the world of magic. In exchange for being taught, the student agreed to share their knowledge and research with their master even after they became a fully fledged mage of their own. In truth, this was a one-way street. The master had no obligation to share anything they learned from their research with their students.

It was common for students to inherit their master's work, but there were always exceptions. For example, an archmage with multiple students might pass everything on to just one favorite, leaving the rest to fend for themselves. That wasn't particularly unique to the world of magic, though. It often happened in any trade that took apprentices. And even if the students had to share their knowledge with their masters, they would usually keep some things to themselves.

The other way of learning magic was to join one of the three magic academies in Odine.

The first of these, the Military Academy, wasn't just about learning magic; it also taught practical applications for its use in war. The second, the Monster Warfare Academy, specialized in teaching magic for self-defense and combat against monsters. This was the clear choice for those intending to work as adventurers.

A third existed for those who couldn't join either of the other two, focusing only on the fundamentals of magic, aptly named the Academy of Fundamentals.

The Military Academy was created specifically to fulfill the Alliance's objective in founding Odine: to provide mages for war. In a way, it was the most important of the academies. However, only those with citizenship in one of the Alliance's states could apply, and upon graduation, you were required to serve a term of military service for the country of your citizenship. It went without saying that with how critical mages were to the military, they were paid far more than an ordinary soldier, received much better treatment, and had an

easy path to promotion. It was truly an elite course, but it was one that would never work for me.

The Monster Warfare Academy was made to produce adventurers, and so graduation came with an obligation of three years' service to the Alliance as one. It didn't appeal to me much at this time either. A team of adventurers with even one mage could handle a much wider range of combat situations, effectively guaranteeing steady work for themselves. But magic required a certain aptitude to use properly, so there weren't that many people that could become mages. As such, adventurers always found themselves lacking mages. I knew a fair number of adventurers myself, but only a small handful of them were mages.

Realizing this, Odine went out of its way to train mages to work as adventurers, which in turn drew in adventurers from across the world who were looking for mages to join their teams. By requiring graduates to operate within the Alliance itself for a time, the academy had reduced the number of victims to monster attacks considerably.

Lastly, the Academy of Fundamentals came with no obligations after graduation but charged a far greater tuition. On top of that, as the name suggested, they only taught the fundamentals of magic. If one wanted to learn anything deeper, they would need to search out a master to teach them after graduation.

In the end, none of them seemed to be quite what I was looking for, which left me a little disappointed. I only came to Odine to learn magic out of curiosity, so the Academy of Fundamentals was my only real option. And honestly, the tuition fee wasn't an issue for me. But after coming all this way, being told I only had one path available to me made it seem far less appealing. Most importantly, there was no feeling of fate to it.

There was a part of me that felt like giving up. I didn't *have* to learn magic here. I could always search out a teacher somewhere else. Simply learning that I possessed the aptitude for magic had made this trip worth it.

I couldn't help but feel discouraged... So to lift my spirits, I turned to

blacksmithing. I would have to stay in Odine while I waited for contact from Airenna anyway. A city so involved with magic might have had less demand for traditional weapons and armor, but I enjoyed making daily necessities like pots and knives, or even nostalgic items like nails, just as much.

There was no use in sulking, so I decided to pay a visit to Odine's blacksmithing guild. I had no idea that the fateful meeting I was looking for would happen there.



“Please, teach me!”

In my third week working for the blacksmithing guild in Odine, a man in a robe clung to me as he begged. Nothing in particular stood out about his appearance, besides being reasonably well-built and having an impressive grip for a mage.

I had come to the blacksmithing guild expecting to make daily necessities, but surprisingly I had only been asked to make weapons and armor so far. Apparently the Military Academy and the Monster Warfare Academy also taught combat with weapons, so there was actually a demand for them. In addition, stealing the work of making daily goods from the city's blacksmiths would threaten their livelihoods.

So while there wasn't a huge demand for weapons and armor, there was a lack of skilled smiths capable of making them. The guild wanted to take advantage of the opportunity of having a master blacksmith visiting the city and get as much high-grade equipment as possible.

Even though I could see through their intentions, being relied on in such a way was hardly a cause for complaint. I happily started by turning out plenty of swords, axes, and spears for them.

But that day, the moment I stepped into the blacksmithing guild's building, a man bothering the staff turned and sprinted to my side. Appearing to be a mage from his outfit, he immediately dropped to one knee and bowed his head, begging me to teach him. Having no idea what was going on, I instinctively stepped back at his sudden energetic plea, but he grabbed my legs to prevent me from escaping.



If I had thought he was hostile, I could have just kicked him away, but despite his desperation, I couldn't sense any negativity in his attitude toward me. Though I was initially put off by his behavior, I supposed it would be best to calm him down and hear him out.

Thinking back on it, whenever I had asked someone to teach me, I always pressed forward just as much as they tried to pull away, giving them no choice in the end. At the time, I had totally failed to realize that he was doing exactly the same thing to me, as I stepped back to hear his request. I had probably lost the battle from that very moment.

My meeting with the young man, Kawshman Feedel, was truly fate, but I found it a little vexing that he had been the one to bring that fate about, not me.

Kawshman was a full-fledged mage with his own research lab in Odine, known as an atelier. Though he wasn't an archmage living in a spired building, the fact that he had become a mage before reaching the age of twenty must have meant he was plenty skilled. And he had come to me with a single-minded drive to learn blacksmithing. He wanted to create a sword with magic engraved into it: a magic sword.

A few years ago, Kawshman had been a student of another mage named Rajudor. He was a true rarity in Odine, a dwarven mage. In fact, he was one of the dwarves with talent for magic that the city hall clerk had told me about.

Rajudor had an atelier in the city where he studied the creation of relics, weapons and accessories with magic enchantments. After learning magic from his dwarven master, Kawshman naturally wanted to pursue the same path. But a few years prior, Rajudor had been called back to the land of the dwarves. Luckily, Kawshman had learned the fundamentals of magic already, so when his master left, he had the confidence to continue studying on his own.

Kawshman had continued his work of engraving rituals into ready-made goods to create relics and ended up being recognized as a professional mage. But he lamented when he compared his work with his master's. In contrast to his master, Kawshman didn't have the skill to create his own weapons and

accessories. Rajudor had been forced to leave before he could teach this, so Kawshman had been unable to make his magic sword.

He had long anguished over the problem but had been unable to find a solution...until he had seen one of my swords. He immediately recognized the dwarven techniques behind its crafting. He felt that the hand of fate had guided him to this moment. Though he couldn't make weapons himself, he had the eye to discern a good weapon from a bad one.

He had assumed a famed dwarven smith had come to the city, and so he asked the guild to introduce him. When he had heard the sword was made by an elf, he doubted his ears. But after hearing I had learned my craft from a dwarf myself, and after seeing a copy of my master blacksmith's license that the guild had on record, he believed them. He thought that if I had picked up the skills of a dwarf as an elf, I would be able to teach them to him as well. To that end, he had come to the guild personally, waiting for my arrival, unwilling to let this chance escape him.

Well, how should I put it? It seemed like my personal info had been leaked all over the place. Well, the idea of privacy of information was pretty foreign to this world, so I couldn't blame them too much...

"Please! I'll do anything! I'll pay you! I'll do any work you want me to, so please teach me!"

Honestly speaking, I understood his desperation far too well. Besides that, after hearing his story, I noticed that his master Rajudor had left Odine around the same time Oswald left Vistcourt. Our meeting might have been fate after all.

I could sympathize with him, but I felt like he was cheating in a way. It would take something like ten years to teach him enough skill in blacksmithing to make a magic sword. But when it was all said and done, he'd be able to make a magic sword, and I wouldn't. Really, if he wanted one so badly, it would be more efficient for him to teach me magic so I could make it.

That was for sure.

Probably...

Not long ago, I would have complained immediately and started arguing with him, but now I was much more clever. My long journey after leaving Ludoria had taught me that running recklessly forward wasn't enough to get what I wanted. I didn't need to deny someone else to get something for myself. And Kawshman had just said he would do *anything*.

"All right then. If you're willing to do anything, then would you teach me magic? I'm interested in relics too...specifically, magic swords. That sounds like a fair deal to me."

Kawshman lifted his head, blinking in stunned surprise back at me and my outstretched hand.



Before evening came, I moved out of my inn room and into Kawshman's atelier. He had inherited the workshop from his dwarven master, so there was a forge already built into it.

It felt somehow nostalgic to me. It reminded me of the forge back in Vistcourt. Though it had been left cold for quite some time, it had been kept clean, showing how precious it was to its owner.

It gave me a very good impression of Kawshman. For someone who couldn't even use it to maintain a forge so carefully...no, for someone to maintain a forge like this *even though* he couldn't use it meant he would likely become a great blacksmith.

"I'll teach you blacksmithing. You'll teach me magic. We'll both use our expertise to create a magic sword together. When we fight, we'll settle it with fists, like dwarves do. Are those conditions all right with you?"

Kawshman nodded, extending his hand to me once again. I took his hand in mine, squeezing tightly. Though I wouldn't go so far as to say that we shared fates, we were now comrades. For the first time since I had come to Odine, I felt the winds of fate blowing strongly.

Unable to suppress my excitement, I lit the forge. What I was most excited for was to work in a forge like this again.

"Then let's get started. I'd like to begin by making something, but did you

have anything in mind? How much do you know? Where do you want to start?”

Throwing some charcoal I had bought from the guild into the furnace, I looked in on the fire spirits. With the fire of their home gone for so long, they had been asleep, and so they woke with huge yawns. Drawing in the air around them, the furnace burst to life.

The moment the furnace was lit, the whole forge changed. Just like the fire spirits had awoken, it felt like the forge itself had just ended a long sleep. Heat from the flames slowly filled the room.

“Oh, uh...anything. Anything is fine,” Kawshman said, squinting at the freshly relit furnace. “Right now, I just want to hear the sound of metal on metal.”

He gave me a fantastic answer. He must have really loved his master of magic. Of course, I could say the same thing about my own feelings for Master Damned Dwarf.

But regardless, I’d have to make something.

“Let’s see. Well, we’re aiming for a magic sword in the end, so why not start with a sword?”

Kawshman’s eyes glittered at my suggestion. He looked like a kid. I could tell exactly what he wanted to say. There was nothing unpleasant about that feeling at all.

With my blacksmithing and his magic, we were both like birds with only one wing. To create the magic sword we were both looking for, we would have to stick together until we had learned enough from each other that we could fly on our own. And when that day came, we would surely depart as friends.

The next morning, we started with my lessons in magic. We began with learning how to control the mana in one’s body. Without being able to do that, no amount of studying magic would help, and I wouldn’t be able to use relics.

But I had already experienced what that felt like during my aptitude test. When I thought back to how that felt, it wasn’t too difficult to do it again. Even those who passed the aptitude test often got tripped up on this step, including apparently Kawshman himself, so when I got through it without issue, he

seemed a bit conflicted.

Well, there was nothing I could do about that. High elves were unreasonably gifted creatures from the start. Only a god could mess with the differences in races like that.

Anyway, after figuring out how to control the mana in my body and direct it outwards, the next step was learning rituals. These encompassed everything that influenced mana itself. Spoken words, thoughts, and engravings could all alter the nature of mana and add attributes to it. All of these together created rituals.

For example, if you released mana with a feeling of anger, the person who received it would feel a force of pressure. For the most part, only mages and those born with an exceptional sensitivity to mana could perceive it. But if anger was implemented into the ritual, they would still feel a faint physical pressure from it.

Of course, aside from emotions, there were spoken words and engravings. Countless things could serve as rituals. Mages studied the currently known rituals, analyzed the laws under which they operated, and used that amassed knowledge to synthesize new forms of magic.

In short, magic was the accumulation of effort from every mage and their predecessors. That explained why mages had such disdain for spirit callers, who could exhibit greater powers due to nothing more than a quirk of their birth. To them, elves like me were cheating in comparison.

“But that’s like being jealous of birds because they can fly, or of dragons because they can breathe fire. You can ignore such stupid envy. If you want to learn magic, and you’ve got the talent for it, then you should do what you want,” Kawshman said while he was teaching me a ritual for warmth, one that required both spoken words and engravings. He didn’t hold anything back in his instruction.

He was right. In the end, it was just a difference due to race. There was nothing anyone could do about it, so there was no reason to worry about it. I had once again found something to like in Kawshman.

As we took turns teaching each other blacksmithing and magic, we also discussed what kind of magic sword we wanted to make. For example, did we want a proper sword with enhanced sharpness? Or one so sturdy and resilient that it could accompany its wielder forever without degrading? Maybe one flashy enough to draw admiration from others, like a flaming sword? We talked endlessly about the possibilities like we were children.

We were both boys, after all. It wasn't our fault we were in love with the idea of such a romantic weapon.



Kawshman and I had been teaching each other for quite some time when, one day, a letter and an object arrived for me. The letter, personally delivered by an adventurer, was Airen's report of her current situation.

First, the Kingdom of Ludoria had recognized that all of the strife had come about due to nobles taking elves as slaves and so had executed all those involved. That was the only option they had to soothe the citizens living in fear of another earthquake. However, they treated the event as something the nobles had done independently, so there was no apology forthcoming from the kingdom itself.

Well, Ludoria had its own honor to think about, so I had expected they might refuse to accept any responsibility. They had likely guessed that the elves had left Ludoria en masse, but I doubted they could imagine what impact that would have. The true effects probably wouldn't be felt for another three to five years. At that point, the elves that had left would have adjusted to their new lives elsewhere, so I doubted all of them would be willing to return to their old homes.

The forests in Ludoria becoming breeding grounds for monsters was now an inevitability. Though it was unfortunate, it had been decided from the start that the elves wouldn't return without an official apology from the crown. If no apology was forthcoming, no precedent would be left behind in history, and the same thing could just as easily happen again.

So it would be another ten years, if not more, before I could show myself at Kaeha's place again.

However, setting aside the larger issues that I couldn't do anything to solve, the rest of the letter was far more important to me. Among the elves that had been rescued from slavery, there ended up being only a single case of a woman being left pregnant, though I wasn't sure how to feel about it being reported in such a negative light, like a casualty. I was in no place to judge whether that child was a boon or a curse on its mother.

It was quite difficult for a human and an elf to conceive a child together, so I really wanted to think of such a rare child as a blessing, but I knew reality wasn't so kind.

Elves and high elves raised their children as a community. The bond between parent and child was much weaker than it was among humans. A half-elf raised in that environment would inevitably feel isolated.

Not only did half-elves have different life spans from other elves, they also matured at a different rate. As I mentioned before, high elves lived for nearly a millennium, while normal elves lived between five hundred and seven hundred years. But half-elves had a similar life span to dwarves of only two to three hundred years.

A high elf ages extremely slowly, taking about ten times as long to reach the same level of maturity as a human. I hadn't really achieved self-awareness until I was about thirty. Ordinary elves didn't take quite that long, but it was still about twenty years before they became conscious of themselves. Half-elves, however...not much was known about them, since the majority were not permitted to live past birth, but they seemed to reach the same level of maturity within six to seven years.

As one might expect, elves felt little camaraderie with a child that grew up so fast. No matter how much I told them not to see half-elves as cursed, clearing up such prejudices wasn't so easy. Furthermore, if the child's human blood ran strong, they wouldn't be able to see or interact with the spirits, leaving them entirely without a place in elven society.

As such, the mother and the village chief requested that I take the child once it was old enough to leave its mother. Before they became emotionally attached, before they learned to love or hate it, before things got difficult.

I wondered if Airena would take care of the child if I declined, but there was no way I could. I was the one who had asked them to spare the child's life, after all. It only made sense that I take responsibility.

The only issue was that all I really felt for the child at this point was pity. It hadn't even been born yet, but as I worried about how it would be treated, that was the only feeling that came to mind. Even that feeling of pity itself made me feel bad for them.

Would I be able to love it properly? I folded the letter in my hands, closed my eyes, and sank deep into thought. I spent about ten minutes like that. At the end of that agonizing worrying, I finally thought:

Yeah, it'll probably be fine.

Maybe the child deserved an apology for this, but in any case, I was actually starting to get a little excited.

If the child was a boy, we could go out bug catching together. Actually, despite being a high elf, I wasn't super fond of bugs. But fishing was a good option. If it was a girl, I'd definitely spoil her rotten. I could see myself bawling my eyes out on the day she got married.

It didn't matter to me whether he or she could be friends with the spirits. I was, but it was ordinary enough for friends of a foster parent to not become friends with their child. If they grew up wanting to learn blacksmithing, swordsmanship, or maybe even magic, I would teach them everything I could. If they wanted to do something else entirely, I'd learn it right along with them. Whether it was leatherworking or weaving, poetry or farming, or if they wanted to become a merchant, I was sure we'd have fun learning it together.

I was a high elf, so I would likely long outlive him or her. But I could definitely love them. I hadn't even met them yet, but I believed that firmly.

I didn't have the best personality for parenting. My penchant for living according to my whims made me hardly qualified to act as one, being the selfish damned elf that I was. But I could be their guardian and their closest friend.

So I wrote my response. I was looking forward to when the child would be

born and the day we'd finally meet. Either way, that was a long way off.

As far as the item that arrived with the letter, the same adventurer had brought the greedboar leather I had left in Palnore. There wasn't much to say about it. I had no complaints about the work, but compared to the news about the small friend I had yet to meet, it was kind of lacking in impact. I could take my time thinking about what I wanted to do with it.



Magic was the technique of using rituals to alter the properties of mana to invoke a desired phenomenon. The rituals themselves took a number of forms, from spoken words to engravings to the user's own thoughts and feelings. So as obvious as it might be, if some ritual other than the ones necessary for a given spell were influencing the mana, the spell as a whole would fail.

As such, being able to disconnect one's feelings from the process became an invaluable skill, as they were the most likely cause of interference. Of course, it wasn't so easy to just close off one's heart, so spiritual training to remain calm and collected in any situation was necessary for any mage.

"I just thought of something," I called out to Kawshman as we sat together in meditation.

That was probably something I wasn't supposed to do, but what I had thought of was pretty important, so I wanted to ask him right away.

A year had passed since we first agreed to teach each other. We had learned to understand each other to a decent degree, so Kawshman knew I wouldn't interrupt our training for something pointless.

"Mmm...what is it?" Slowly, he opened his eyes and replied.

Since it had suddenly occurred to me, I wasn't sure I would be able to explain it properly, so I spent a few seconds organizing my thoughts.

"Relics aren't commonly used because you need to put mana into them, and anyone who could do that would just use magic themselves, right?"

I started by laying out the premise. If my understanding here was wrong, then nothing I was about to say would matter.

“Yeah. Even I figured it would be faster to learn how to ignite something with magic than use tools to create fire,” Kawshman answered with a wry smile. Even a mage who studied relics thought just using magic would be quicker. But that magic required the mage to remain calm in any situation, didn’t it?

“But that’s only the case when you’re composed. If you’re in a situation where you’re being ambushed, or if things are chaotic enough that your magic would fail...wouldn’t a relic be more stable?”

My suggestion was to use relics, specifically magical weapons, for self-defense. For rituals that involved words, being flustered would influence the mana just as easily, so it would throw the results of the spell out of balance. So if one needed to protect themselves in an emergency, being able to cast a spell just by putting mana into a relic should help improve the survival rate of mages.

In my mind, a mage was someone who should be wielding some sort of staff. Whether it was a literal staff, or a wand, a rod, or just a stick, it didn’t really matter. Some sort of staff would make the best impression.

“You could engrave the ritual onto the tip of a staff, so you could activate the spell at a distance from yourself without any extra steps. And it’s pretty normal for someone to carry a staff around.”

As I happily spilled these thoughts from my head, I suddenly noticed Kawshman was staring at me in wide-eyed disbelief. Honestly, the look on his face was frightening enough it could probably make a child cry. But he wasn’t angry.

“A mage can use multiple different spells, so a relic with only one spell engraved on it isn’t much use,” I continued. “So the only way to convince them it’s useful is if you come up with a situation where they would need that specific spell.”

For example, aside from self-defense, what about magic for traveling? If you were using magic to float yourself somewhere, unforeseen circumstances could distract you and send you tumbling to the ground. I doubted there were many mages who could collect themselves and become calm enough to recast their magic while falling out of the sky. But with a relic, all they would have to do was put magical energy into something, and the effect would remain stable.

On top of that, for spells which required prolonged concentration, that continuous focus could be off-loaded to a relic. I thought that by following this kind of thinking, we could drum up some demand for relics and thus prove their value.

After quite a long time of thinking, Kawshman finally gave a heavy sigh.

“Ugh, no good. I don’t know. I don’t know if that will be enough to make people think of relics as necessary. I don’t even know if it would really work. But it sounds interesting. I want to give it a try.” But when he lifted his head, he wore a full-faced smile. Curiosity for a new idea and the desire to make something new lit his features.

“Then let’s do it,” I said. “If we want to engrave a ritual on it, maybe a short metal rod would be best?” Once we had come to that decision, we couldn’t bear to sit around meditating. I jumped to my feet.

“No, I’m worried about what happens if it fails. Make something as long as possible, and we’ll put a ritual on it to make water. If that works out, then we can look at shortening the staff and putting more potent rituals on it.”

Kawshman stood with me. Excited as he was, he had enough of a level head to put safety first.

After a long stretch, we set off for the forge. We walked quickly, pushed along by our anticipation of a new creation.



Magic training was actually quite simple. A mage’s strength was measured by how many rituals they could employ. So in effect, training simply amounted to expanding one’s knowledge of rituals. In other words, studying.

Luckily, I had a great memory for things I had an interest in. But I wasn’t confident enough to call myself smart, judging by the number of people who called me an idiot or a madman.

My quill scratched across the paper, recording the pattern for a ritual. For me, copying something down by hand was the fastest way to memorize it.

When it came to engraved rituals, accuracy was all the more critical. If you didn't get the pattern exactly right, the whole thing would be entirely useless.

I had to wonder what on earth had possessed the first person who tried out these patterns to discover they had magical properties. Nowadays there were plenty of known patterns, so one could reverse engineer them to some degree, but whoever found the first one had to do so without any hints whatsoever. The more rituals I learned, the more astounding it seemed, but my hand continued to faithfully copy the example before me.

Three years had passed since I began learning magic. The relics we had designed to be used for self-defense were effectively ignored just for being relics, but after a certain event, they suddenly started gaining a lot of traction in Odine.

That turning point was when Darottei began a full-scale invasion of North Zaile, the northernmost nation of the Azeuda Alliance. North Zaile had called on the Alliance for help, and so the mages associated with the military in Odine were dispatched. Kawshman had no such affiliation, and of course neither did I, so neither of us were involved. However, the students of the Military Academy were sent along with them as a supporting unit.

One of the students bought a short staff from Kawshman and myself as a good luck charm, one that could use defensive magic...and it ended up saving his life. When the Darottei cavalry launched a sneak attack on one of the rear encampments, the student in question panicked and used the defensive relic to protect himself. Thanks to that, the mage in training had survived the surprise attack. This apparently amazed the military, who immediately took a deep interest in the staff. After evaluating it to be sufficiently reliable, the mages in the military made it an official part of their gear.

Yes, people had finally come to see the value in relics. Now in Odine, Kawshman was the only mage eccentric enough to specialize in them, and as such he became the leading expert in them. As his name began to spread, the number of requests to collaborate and the number of students asking to apprentice under him grew tremendously. If he took those students on, he would definitely earn the title of archmage.

And yet...

“Ugh, this presentation is a pain in the ass. What point is there in explaining it all to people who never cared before?”

Across the room from me, Kawshman was lying flat on his desk, exhausted by his efforts to get paperwork together for a presentation due in half a month. He had been quite blunt about turning away all of the prospective students and all of the calls for collaboration, saying he wasn't interested in wasting time he could be spending learning blacksmithing or studying relics himself. He had far more interest in the things he could create than in some title he might earn.

But by turning down offers to collaborate and closing the door on new students, the number of people capable of producing relics stayed the same. After the military made those short staves a part of their regular equipment, many people grew concerned about the fact that Kawshman was the only one capable of producing them. Not many people had put the time into developing these rituals due to their difficulty in use. As such, the higher-ups had called on him and, despite his reluctance, convinced him to at least give a presentation on his research thus far.

Well, I could understand his complaints. But I was more interested in what was to come afterward.

“More importantly, once you're done with the presentation, we've got that prototype to make. We'll put one of your rituals onto a sword that I made. I really can't wait to try it, so hurry up and finish.” I wasn't trying to console him at all; I was just making a one-sided demand.

“You're right, I'm wasting my time with this. I'll do what I can to finish, so you go ahead and make a bunch of swords for us.” His ambition revitalized, he sat back up and began cleaning up his papers.

With the amount of knowledge I had, I wasn't in a good position to be selecting the rituals we would use. And Kawshman, though he had a good sense for blacksmithing thanks to studying previously under a dwarf, still lacked much skill in blacksmithing himself. Neither of us was yet capable of making a sword sturdy enough to survive use and also engrave a precise ritual on it.

But we were both getting close. At this rate, though it would still be far from

perfect, it would take about two more years before we could run the rest of the race on our own. And in two years, I'd have to go pick up the half-elf child. So we had decided that while we were still preparing to go our separate ways, we would make a magic sword for each of us as a collaborative effort, using all of our individual skills.

Of course, we'd be starting with a prototype. There were still plenty of difficulties to overcome in making a magic sword. For example, even if a proper ritual were engraved on the weapon to create the desired effect, if the weapon was even slightly bent, the ritual would warp and become powerless. In order to avoid that, would we make the blade softer and only put the ritual on a more solid part of the weapon? Or would we use magic itself to strengthen the blade?

The former put the practicality of the weapon into question, while the latter would require mana flowing through the weapon constantly when it was in use. We would need to test both, as well as many more solutions, in our search for the perfect answer.

In other words, an exciting round of trial and error awaited us. So I wanted Kawshman to finish with his presentation as soon as possible.



Aside from the use of rituals, there were plenty of people who put engravings on their swords. Of course, just engraving something on it didn't improve its sturdiness, or make it sharper, or make it heavier or lighter. Well, I suppose technically it slightly changed the weight of the weapon and so altered its balance.

The main reason people put engravings on swords was just for decoration—in simple terms, to make them look cool. I had nothing against that, though. The look of a weapon is surprisingly important. If you compared a swordsman with a plain iron sword to another with an extravagantly engraved one, which would appear more threatening? Of course it depended somewhat on the situation, but it would often be the latter. On top of that, a well-decorated weapon had a greater effect on its wielder than a plain one. These small changes made no small difference on the battlefield. It was similar to using war paint to inspire or

encourage yourself during battle.

In short, I was pretty confident in my ability to decorate weapons. That said, though I had entered one of my ornamented swords into a competition, it didn't beat the best smith in Ludoria. At the time, I had been more focused on learning swordsmanship myself, so I hadn't cared too much. Thinking back on it, though, it was a little frustrating. I still didn't feel like I could beat that master's work.

I could at least be proud that my work had managed to take second place in a competition held by a kingdom as large as Ludoria. So while it certainly wouldn't be easy, if I were asked to replicate a magical ritual on a weapon with utmost precision, it was certainly possible.

Seeing our completed weapon, Kawshman trembled in silent awe. The piece moved him, filling him with both delight and frustration. This wasn't one of our mass-produced prototypes made only to test whether or not we could get the magic to activate. This was an actual complete magic sword, built from the ground up just for this purpose, one I could take pride in.

Kawshman was moved by the sight of it, delighted at his dream taking shape right in front of him, but frustrated at not being the one to make it.

I could understand his feelings, but...it had taken everything I had to make that sword. I was too exhausted to even speak. I had already tested the sword for its balance and sharpness, since it couldn't really be called complete until I had tested that much.

But I was only testing its quality as a sword. I had yet to try running any mana through it. That, at the very least, would be Kawshman's job. This magic sword had been born from our meeting, but he was the one who had set that fate in motion, not I. That meant it was most appropriate for him to be the first one to truly wield it.

Four years had passed since I met Kawshman. Those four years had all gone into this weapon. With shaking hands, he grabbed the hilt of the sword, lifted it up, and channeled mana into it. The pattern engraved on the blade glowed briefly before flames erupted around it.



The intense flames would have been enough to damage the blade itself, so additional magic had been engraved into the sword to restore its original form afterward.

Kawshman and I had different opinions on how to deal with the blade warping. As a novice in swordsmanship, he felt that the most rational solution was magic to restore the blade, which would be easier on the user. On the other hand, I figured a wielder of a magic sword would be strong enough to handle the excess cost in mana of using magic to reinforce the blade so it didn't become damaged in the first place.

Of course, both approaches had their own pros and cons. For example, the restoration magic couldn't improve the strength of the weapon itself, so if the weapon received a considerable impact all at once, the restoration ritual itself could be damaged and the weapon would break. However, if magic was used to reinforce the blade beforehand, if the user wasn't able to activate the magic before blocking a sudden attack, even the slightest amount of damage would become irreparable. The damage would gradually grow worse and worse over time, and there would be no way to reverse it.

Since both had obvious benefits and flaws, it really came down to which the wielder preferred. In my case, I had the skill to repair a damaged blade, so I could comfortably use either. But although I still preferred reinforcing the blade over restoring it, I couldn't argue that the combination of fire magic and restoration magic made for a fantastic piece.

Kawshman slowly swung the flaming sword around. Honestly speaking, his posture was terrible and his grip was all wrong, so there was no telling when the weapon might slip out from his fingers. As such, I quickly found a spot to hide. No matter how tired I was, risk management was important.

I didn't have the heart to ruin his moment. As scary as it was to watch someone totally untrained swing around a sword like that, seeing the joy in his face made me feel a little jealous. I'd have to make one for myself sooner rather than later.

We had already developed the rituals needed for my preferred weapon as

well as exactly how to place them properly. That said, I was totally exhausted, both physically and mentally. I'd probably sleep for a few days, and it would take another week of work to finish another sword. I was looking forward to it so badly that I would probably have difficulty resting.



“Ei, Dah, Pitus, Roh, Fos!”

As I recited the proper words, paying careful attention to my pronunciation, the mana gathered in my hand turned into a ball of fire and launched forward. Upon impact, the ball of fire exploded, blowing the rock I was using as a target to pieces.

The three archmages watching clapped in appreciation. I had just used an exploding fireball spell. It was a bit slow to activate but had considerable power behind it. Being able to use this spell was one of the requirements for being recognized as a fully fledged mage.

Yes, that's right. I was in the middle of a certification exam for being a mage. Honestly speaking, if I was able to use magic, I didn't really care whether people considered me a student or a professional. But things weren't that simple. After all, Kawshman had no other students, so I was his only hope at achieving the rank of archmage.

It was actually a pretty difficult process. Being an elf, the archmages didn't want to give me their recognition. Unbeknownst to them, I was actually a high elf, capable of using the power of the spirits to a much greater degree than they realized, but there was no reason for me to tell them that.

Kawshman's feats in the field of relic production had become too numerous to ignore. Of course, the creation of our magic swords was a big part of that. If someone of his abilities was denied the title of archmage, those with much less impressive accomplishments would also be barred from reaching it. And a lowly mage holding greater fame than the average archmage would send tremors through Odine's entire system of authority.

As such, the archmages that acted as leaders in Odine needed Kawshman to receive that promotion. He wasn't particularly interested in the title from the

start and in fact seemed to find it more work than it was worth, so I really didn't need to worry about it. But those who became obstacles for the ambitions of others often found themselves being socially, and sometimes even physically, removed from the picture. In the end, it was smarter for Kawshman to become an archmage. The fame and rank of that title would protect him, and he would be able to avoid earning a needless grudge from the other archmages.

So I took this certification exam rather seriously. It was made up of three practical tests regarding combat magic, healing magic, and general use magic, as well as two written academic tests about magic history and rituals... You only needed to pass in three of these subjects to earn recognition as a mage, but I intended to ace all five. If I could be recognized as a skilled mage, that would pave the way for Kawshman to easily obtain the rank of archmage.

In essence, I was trying to repay Kawshman for teaching me magic.

Though I wasn't yet capable of doing so alone, after five years of studying magic, I had still managed to create the magic sword I was hoping for.

It was about that time again.

From here on out, Kawshman and I would be walking our separate ways. The days of soaring to new heights by supporting each other were over. Once I passed this exam, I intended to leave Odine. I needed to pick up the half-elf child before they became fully aware of how different they were from those around them. I had no intention of leaving the child unaware of their differences or of the fact that they were adopted, but there was no need to make them suffer by forcing that realization on them too early.

When I told Kawshman why I was leaving, he laughed.

"I find kids too annoying to like them myself, but I kind of want to see what sort of kid you raise."

I wondered if Kawshman intended to pass on his skills in creating relics to anyone in the future. In the five years we had spent together, he never made any moves to find a lover, and he never took any other students.

I was a little worried, but really it was none of my business. Even if his skills died with him, the things he created would still be left behind. There was a certain sense of romance to that as well.

Speaking of which, to match Kawshman's flaming sword, I made my magic sword to be one of ice... Just kidding. I wouldn't do something so cliché. While an ice sword would certainly look cool, it wouldn't make any practical difference. In fact, the frozen metal would stick to skin, making it even harder to use than an ordinary sword.

So instead, I made my sword extremely thin, about the width of a few sheets of paper. It was so thin as to seem useless as a sword and normally would never survive any sort of use. If my master in blacksmithing saw it, he would instantly take a hammer to it and smash it to pieces. Never mind a hammer, just the impact of striking another sword would easily bend and snap the blade.

But this was a magic sword. I had engraved it with rituals to reinforce the sturdiness and sharpness of the blade. With mana flowing through it, it could take the blows of a sledgehammer like they were nothing. It wasn't as showy as one would expect from a magic sword, but I had crowded every inch of the weapon with rituals for reinforcing the strength and sharpness of the blade.

So while it was terribly fragile and as useless as a toy without the flow of mana, once the magic was activated, it would be a peerless weapon. The peculiar nature of the weapon meant that using it was entirely unlike using any other sword, and so it would require a lot of practice to learn to use properly. It was the perfect weapon for me.

I also tried using some of the metal I had discovered during my aptitude test for its scabbard. The material, known as Fairy's Silver, was made when certain species of monsters consumed metallic ores to help in breaking apart and digesting other food. Those ores became refined within the monsters' bodies, creating a metallic substance.

By using a small amount of it in the scabbard's construction, simply having the sword at my hip would keep the reinforcing magic active and prevent the weapon from being damaged by any unforeseen accidents. A sword that sucked the mana out of its user just from having it on their person made it sound more

cursed than magical, didn't it?

Though it required mana to be actively flowing through it, Kawshman's sword was one that anyone could see and instantly recognize as a powerful, magical weapon. On the other hand, I doubted anyone else would appreciate the value of mine, other than maybe my master Kaeha. It was the perfect weapon for a maniac like me. I felt the two swords made an interesting pair.

While Kawshman had certainly taught me magic, I didn't really see him as my master in the same way as Kaeha and Oswald. I saw him more as a rival. Though we had worked together to get this far, from here on out we'd be walking alone. In an effort to overtake him on that path, I had made a magic sword entirely unlike his.

"Student of Kawshman Feedel. Acer. The result of your rituals test is...a pass."

The archmage announced my fifth passing grade, sounding a little irritated for some reason. I couldn't say it was the obvious outcome, but I had been confident in my work, so I was satisfied to hear the result. I politely thanked the examiners.

Kawshman wasn't the kind of guy for teary farewells, so I didn't feel the need to make some exaggerated speech either. He had just laughed and said, "See you later."

I couldn't say for sure whether this would be goodbye for good. If my adopted child showed an interest in magic, there was a good chance I'd bring them back to Odine. By that time, Kawshman would probably be deep into his middle age...actually, he'd probably be quite elderly. I would love to compare what kind of magic swords we had managed to make after all that time.

A few days after the end of my exam, I received my certificate from Odine's government, left Kawshman's atelier behind, and ended my stay in Odine.

Excerpt — Dripping Memories

The Executioner's Sword

As I hammered hot steel on the anvil in front of me, it slowly began resembling the shape in my head. The process felt very much like mountain climbing. The most essential thing was preparation, after which came readiness. You couldn't just rush for the summit; you had to plan out your route and where you would take breaks.

Right now, I was working on a double-edged sword with no tip. It was intended for use with two hands, but it wasn't especially long. That was because this wasn't a weapon for battle. It would never be used for stabbing, so it didn't need a sharp tip. And the target would never be moving, so it didn't need to be especially long. The guard was small, the pommel pear-shaped.

The client was adamant that the weapon be made exactly according to the specifications provided. In a manner of speaking, it was a ritual weapon.

"You're really taking that job?" When I had first taken the job from Odine's blacksmithing guild, Kawshman seemed quite concerned.

Honestly, I had hesitated a bit as well. I hadn't been sure if it was a job I should take. That was because the intended use of this sword was to execute criminals. Yes, it was an executioner's sword.

The request came from Prahiya, a kingdom on the eastern border of Odine. You might wonder why a foreign country had made the request to a traveler like me, but there was a good reason for that.

I already explained about the Azuedan Alliance and the Empire of Azueda that preceded it. Odine itself had been founded after the empire's collapse, but Prahiya had existed as a city long before it. In their tradition, execution by the sword like this was relatively honorable and was reserved mostly for use on nobility. And in the time of the empire, there were plenty of nobles around. The

executioner's sword was kept to punish them, and the one who wielded it had a measure of power themselves.

Of course, with the collapse of the empire, the noble class of the independent cities had shrunk dramatically. Posts built up over the long history of the empire disappeared, wiping out the land-holding nobility, those working in government, and those working in law all at once. As a matter of course, the number of executions among the nobility saw a sharp decline, leaving the executioner's sword largely unused, and the long lines of executioners came to an end.

But now, the second prince of Prahiya had been caught plotting to assassinate the crown prince, and so a ceremonial execution had been called for.

They had settled for using a knight captain as a stand-in for the executioner, but the executioner's swords of old had been left to rust and could no longer be expected to perform. The purpose of the executioner's sword was to take the criminal's life with as little pain as possible, after all. The kingdom had attempted to find a local blacksmith who would be willing to create a new one, but they had all declined, fearing repercussions from the king for making a sword specifically to take one of his children's lives.

Understandably, even if the king could accept from an official standpoint that the prince needed to be executed, his opinions on the matter as a father were an entirely different story. No one could guarantee that after some amount of time had passed, he wouldn't turn back on the smith for revenge.

But the sword was still necessary. Beyond what it meant for the kingdom, someone of the royal family couldn't be executed without following the proper procedure.

Things had proceeded to the point where they were considering poisoning the second prince himself, an ironic alternative. They would make it look like he took the poison of his own accord, but naturally it would be forced upon him.

But just then, a government official heard a rumor. In the neighboring kingdom of Odine, there was a wandering elven blacksmith who was famed for his skill. As a wanderer and an elf, there was no reason for him to fear a grudge from the king. If he was as skilled as the rumors suggested, he would have no

difficulty making a sword to the exact specifications they provided.

Apparently that's what they thought.

Of course, they were talking about me. I had really been unsure of whether or not I should take the job. But as I agonized over the decision, I remembered the words of Oswald, Master Damned Dwarf.

"The things we make are tools that can kill people. Even so, that's the path I chose. And it's the path *you* chose."

He had said something like that. Back then, I had been learning blacksmithing in the city of Vistcourt on the edge of the Great Pulha Woodlands, so most of our clients were adventurers. After making weapons for adventurers for so long, I had started to get the wrong idea that they were all being used for a good purpose.

But that was just arrogance on my part. I had no idea how those weapons I made would be used. Even if I sold them to adventurers, they could just as easily use them for murder and robbery. The adventurers could be killed by bandits, and their stolen weapons could be used to raid villages somewhere. Some people even bought weapons just for their aesthetic value, only looking for a showpiece.

But a weapon was a weapon. Whether for good or evil, it was a tool for killing. So creating a sword for an execution was no different than any of my other work. If it was necessary, I just needed to produce something that met the client's expectations and attempt to make the best piece I could.

As I worked on it, Kawshman watched me from behind. I didn't know how he felt about it after hearing my explanation. After all, I couldn't even say I felt the same way as Oswald did after hearing his story. But thanks to his words, I had at least found a way to face what I was doing in making weapons. So I was sure Kawshman would find something similar.

I submitted the finished sword to the blacksmithing guild, then heard nothing of its fate afterward. I didn't know how it was used or how it was perceived by others, but I hoped it was cherished by whoever received it.

Kind Hands on Hair

The pleasant sound of scissors snipping filled the air. These scissors were crafted specially for me by none other than Master Damned Dwarf, so I knew that the sound was accompanied by an unparalleled sharpness. Feeling excited, I couldn't help but want to bob my head along to the rhythm, prompting Airena to push my head back into place. To put it plainly, as an adventurer, her grip was quite strong.

"You are not a child, Lord Acer, so could you please sit still?" Was it just my imagination that her tone sounded like she was scolding a child? Of course, I had no intention of disobeying someone who held a blade behind me, even if they were just scissors.

"Yes, ma'am," I said in a meek voice.

With that I calmed down, leaving myself entirely in her care. She chuckled at my response and got back to work.

The gentle way she worked her hands felt nice. How long had it been since she had started handling my hair?



When I first entered the human world, whenever my hair grew annoyingly long, I sliced it off with a knife the same way as when I had left the forest. I wasn't too concerned about my own appearance, so as long as it wasn't in my way and I wasn't hurting myself when cutting it, I didn't put much thought into my hair. Well, I did keep myself to some level of presentability, since I didn't want to stress others out.

Anyway, one day, Airena caught me just as I was about to cut my hair, and let out quite an impressive scream. Apparently she thought I was attempting to harm myself. From my perspective, her startling scream was what caused the knife to come frighteningly close to my neck. If I had to lay the blame, I felt only seventy percent of it was mine.

I later explained what I was doing and cleared up the confusion, but it wasn't enough to avoid a lecture. I was no longer allowed to cut my hair so half-heartedly, and certainly not with a knife. It was a waste; it was too crude; I was always acting crazy; I needed to look where I was going instead of rushing headlong into anything that caught my interest...and so on, and so on. I stopped paying attention halfway through, but at some point it seemed she forgot we were talking about me cutting my hair.

Ever since then, once every two or three months, she would cut my hair for me. On a few occasions I offered to cut her hair as thanks for her doing mine, but she begged me not to, stone-faced. I was a bit taken aback. Not even I would mess with a girl's hair. At least, not too much.

I cut my own hair only as a necessity, but having someone else do it was surprisingly fun. Having someone gently handling your head felt quite pleasant, and most of all, it produced a much better-looking result. And having my hair cut properly made me feel better than it being sliced haphazardly. I had grown so fond of the experience, I had asked Master Damned Dwarf to make a pair of scissors just for it.

The haircut didn't take that long, but as it came to an end, I started to feel sad. To finish things off, Airena cleaned the fallen hair off my face and shoulders.

“And finished. What do you think, Lord Acer?” She lifted a bronze hand mirror up for me to see. The image of me in the mirror was... Yeah, as expected, my hair was clean and tidy.

“Thanks, it looks great. I know I say this every time, but you really are good with your hands, aren’t you?” I said, brushing some hairs she had missed off my shoulder.

“Thank you very much,” she replied with a bright smile. “But most adventurers are just as capable. Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, but we all need skills for setting up camp or dissecting monster carcasses,” she said rather casually. Or maybe she was trying to interest me in adventuring itself.

Wait, hold on.

“Huh, really? I can set up camp and dissect animals just fine. I wonder if I’d be good at cutting hair. Maybe I should cut your hair as thanks.”

I could do all of those things, so cutting hair should be no problem for me. I looked to Airen’s hair with excitement. The length and volume of her hair would surely be a challenge, but I wanted to try arranging them in rolls. I wondered if I could make her look like a real princess. It sounded like a lot of fun, which I’m sure came across in my gaze.

“Uh, no thank you. Actually, Lord Acer, I should be more clear for you. Absolutely not. Please, I am begging you. Do not.”

But as always, she rejected my offer. I couldn’t say I was surprised, but I wouldn’t give up. Luckily, both of us would live for a long time. After one or two hundred years of persistence, if I left enough time between asking, she was bound to mess up and accidentally agree eventually.

I smiled, my heart feeling as much lighter as my hair did.

Side Stories — Fragments of Meeting

Astre's Adventure

"Astre!"

I gave a faint nod to the cry of warning before moving. It was okay. I knew. All I needed was courage, the strength of will to move forward in a terrifying situation.

The clawed and fanged monkey monster that had leaped out of the trees stepped forward as I did, attempting to slash me with both hands. My hefty mace had more reach than its claws, so if we attacked at the same time, my strike would land first.

Through my leather gloves and into my hands, I felt the crunch of metal smashing bone. My mace had struck the creature in the chest. If I had crushed its head, it would have died instantly. It was still alive for the moment, but with the bones in its chest shattered and piercing its internal organs, the wound was no less fatal or debilitating. If we left it as it was, it would die a slow and painful death, far more cruel than necessary.

Seeing what had happened to their comrade, the other monkeys in the trees stopped their attack, watching us from a distance. At my glare, they reluctantly peeled off and retreated into the forest. Once they had gone, I turned one last time to the maimed monster on the ground and put it out of its misery. After waiting a few seconds to make sure the fight was actually over, I finally lowered my guard and let out a sigh.

Killing monsters. That was the job of adventurers like us, but I still hadn't gotten used to it. But the one thing that had enabled me to survive as an adventurer regardless, and so earn enough to put food on the table, was the reassuring weight of the mace in my hand.

"I got rid of them! Are you okay?" I turned around to face my companion, who had been injured in the previous fight and was now curled up on the

ground around his wounded thigh.

Those monkeys were smart, having a tendency to attack where people were weak. For example, they'd often attack the face to demoralize their opponents, or the legs to make it impossible to stand. My companion had let his guard down, and so the monster had slashed right across his thigh. It didn't look bad enough to be a crippling injury, but without immediate treatment, the filthy claws would no doubt leave an infected wound.

I hurriedly looked around, finding some herbs that thrived in Pulha. They were numerous enough to be worth very little, and their effect wasn't especially powerful. But despite how common they were, not many people knew of their medicinal properties. They would be plenty useful for emergency first aid like this.

Using water to clean the wound, I rubbed the herbs until they turned soft before wrapping them over the wound with a piece of cloth. Even that small amount of first aid left my companion feeling relieved, and his complexion was already starting to improve.

"Th-Thanks. You're amazing, Astre. You can fight off monsters and even know first aid. If I was alone, I'd be toast..."

I lent my ominously grumbling companion a shoulder and helped him to his feet. I could understand how he felt, but right now we needed to prioritize getting out of the forest.

And besides, I wasn't anything special. I had just been following the advice of another man. Wait, was he a man? No, I should say he was an elf.

He was probably pretty strange for an elf. He was working for a dwarven blacksmith, after all. Even kids raised at an orphanage like me knew that elves and dwarves hated each other. But he always seemed like he was having fun, even when he was fighting with his boss.

He seemed like an amazing person, or rather, an amazing elf. He said he only went into Pulha on his days off to hunt, but he would always casually bring back monsters that even veteran adventurers struggled with. Apparently the adventurer's guild was desperate to have him, and I had heard of parties going

to the blacksmith's shop to try and recruit him, but he had bluntly refused them all.

I had heard rumors of some groups being so persistent, they were banned from the shop and even got into fistfights with the elf and the dwarf. I had my suspicions when hearing about a blacksmith beating adventurers in a fistfight, but when I thought of that elf and that dwarf, it sounded somehow plausible.

The number one team of adventurers in the city, White Lake, also regularly used that shop. Basically, it had become an unwritten rule among adventurers to not rub those blacksmiths the wrong way.

When it came to dealing with customers, that elf was extremely kind. His advice on using two hands for wielding the mace and what armor to wear had been perfect. If he hadn't taught me how important it was to protect my legs before going into the woods, I could have easily met the same fate as my companion. And when I brought the mace back to him for maintenance, he gave me all sorts of advice about how to find medicinal herbs and tricks for traveling through the forest.

For example, he had also told me how those monkey monsters had nothing useful that could be harvested from them, and their meat was no good for eating, but their brain was a delicacy. Frankly, I didn't really want to know that last part.

Maybe saying I owed him my life was an exaggeration...but it really felt like I did. At the very least, about a third of my abilities as an adventurer seemed to come from him. He taught me as much as any trainer, maybe even more.

Having defeated the monsters today, it wouldn't be long before I made it to the rank of three stars. That would be the day I was recognized as a proper adventurer. When that happened, I wanted to ask that elf out for dinner as thanks. I mean, I knew he was a guy, but that's not what it was about. I honestly just wanted to thank him. But I couldn't really handle alcohol yet, so inviting him to a bar wouldn't work.

So...

"Come on, Glenn. We'll be out of here soon. Once you've recovered, let's head to the blacksmith and get you some proper armor!"

For now, I just needed to get out of the forest alive. One step at a time, the two of us started on our way back to Vistcourt.

The Elf's Well

What now? You want to hear the story about the elf again? You never get tired of that one, do you? How many times have I told you by now? Ah, fine. But it's bedtime after that, okay?

Well, Mina, it all happened back when I was your age. Back then, we had to get all our water from that river to the west. My job was to go draw water from the river twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening. One day, while I was getting water like usual, someone called out to me.

"Hey, miss. That water is full of mud and dirt. If you drink it, it'll make you sick," he said to me. Surprised, I turned around to find an elf lying down beside a tree. He was so handsome, it felt like he was from another world. I was actually afraid of how beautiful he was, but I answered him.

"We don't drink it like this. If we leave it in a jug for half a day, the dirt settles to the bottom and then we can drink the clean water at the top."

That's right, I had to go in the morning and evening because we had to leave the water overnight if we wanted to use it the next morning. And to use water in the afternoon, we had to let it sit all morning. Looking back now, it was a huge pain, but it was just the way we did things.

When I said that, the elf nodded.

"I see, that's how you do it. That's pretty smart." He stood up and walked over to me at the side of the river. I was in total shock. I had no idea what to do, but he just smiled. "I'll help you carry the water, so could I have a drink? I'm pretty thirsty, but I don't want to wait half a day," he said. He had a really kind smile. I forgot how afraid of him I was and nodded while feeling embarrassed instead.

I went back to the village with the elf, who carried the water for me. Back then, we were one of the poorest villages in Paulogia. The grown-ups were all in

a fuss, but after he had his drink, the elf went to talk to them.

“Why don’t you dig a well?” he asked.

That was a big mistake. He had no idea what was going on in our village, so the grown-ups were furious that he would criticize them.

Digging in a random spot around here wouldn’t get you any water. You’d have to find the right spot and dig really, really deep. So if they wanted to dig a well, they needed to get an engineer from one of the cities. Our village was too poor to afford something so expensive. If they wanted a well, they’d have to sell someone from the village.

I don’t think the elf wanted them to do that at all, but the grown-ups took his question as a criticism of why they hadn’t sold anyone to pay for it yet. But once he understood the situation, the elf bowed and apologized to them. Man, being so handsome really helped him out. Seeing someone so beautiful apologizing to them, even the grown-ups couldn’t stay angry.

But the really amazing thing was what happened next.

The elf came back to me and said, “Okay then, here’s my thanks for the water.” He then grabbed my hand and brought me to the center of the village. He mumbled something as we walked, like he was talking to someone. I thought it was pretty strange, but I didn’t say anything.

When we got there, the elf knocked on the ground like it was someone’s front door. It was really amazing! Because just like a door, the ground popped right open! Water started gushing out everywhere. Everyone was so surprised, they couldn’t believe their eyes! But while water was falling all around us like rain, I could only look at the elf. He was laughing, like he was having so much fun.

After that, everyone in the village worked together to build a proper well around it. You’ve seen it in the middle of the village, right? That’s the one. And that’s why everyone calls it “the elf’s well.”

The grown-ups wanted to do something to thank the elf, but he just laughed. “I did this as thanks for that girl giving me a drink, so it’s fine. It’s not such a big deal.” And with that, he just walked out of the village.

The grown-ups were so confused, they didn’t know what to do. But I ran after

him.

“Will we meet again?” I asked him.

He turned around and said, “If you’re a good girl, then maybe someday.” And then he left.

I still regret forgetting to ask his name. But you know, I made sure to be a good girl. Not that I ever skipped my chores before that either. I made sure to work hard, I met your dad, and then you were born. I’ve been doing my best this whole time.

The village is way bigger now than it used to be. Having easy access to clean drinking water is really a luxury. Once we had that, everyone worked hard to make the village a better place. Now everyone in Paulogia knows about us as the village with the elf’s well.

So I’m sure that elf will come back someday, and he’ll ask, “Can I have a drink of water?” When that day comes, I’ll introduce you to him. So make sure you’re a good girl too.

Okay, that’s the end of the story. Now be a good girl and go to bed!

Imports and a Woman’s Heart

“Don’t do that, Acer. If you’re not careful, you’ll break it.”

I somehow managed to pull the elf back from the shimmering blue bowl he had been scrutinizing up close. It looked like it was carved out of an enormous jewel, so it was clear at a glance it was extremely expensive. Even if I put together all the money from both my day job and my secret work, there was no way I could afford it. Did this elf have anything that could pay for such an incredible piece if he accidentally broke it?

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Glass is pretty fragile, I guess. I’ll be careful. Thanks, Caleina.” The elf turned back and flashed me a smile.

This guy was bad for my heart. Even now, he had set my heart racing away. I knew it was my job to keep an eye on him, but I’d come to regret offering to

show him around.

We were visiting the Fauzash Trading Company, the largest group under the Toritrine family name. This place in particular dealt only in imported goods. Normally, some random traveler would never be allowed inside, but this elf had been given special permission. He had some connection to last week's incident with the Laurette Company, so the Toritrine family had allowed him inside as an apology for failing to stop the Laurette thugs.

"It's not such a big deal, but if you really want to apologize, I'd love to see some rare stuff you brought in from the other side of the sea." That was all he had asked for.

Did he really want for nothing? Normally an apology from such a famous family would mean excitement at the prospect of walking away with bags full of gold or terror at having earned their displeasure. But all he had asked for was to see the inside of one of their shipping warehouses.

Of course I knew he wasn't completely without desire. Despite his refined, inhumanly elegant features, he was an equal match in appetite for the rough fishermen who frequented the bar. He devoured the seafood we served with fervor, though he was more proper in the way he ate than most. The look of satisfaction on his face when he followed his meal up with a drink was hard to miss.

And for some reason, he always seemed to be enjoying himself. Even when he was fighting with Dreeze, or when he was getting wrapped up in the mess in town.

Yeah, that's why this elf's smile was so bad for my heart. The way he smiled while sticking his head into trouble—or rather, when he caused trouble himself—made him really hard to deal with.

There had already been a cleaner solution in place to deal with the problem posed by the Laurette Company. We had been well aware of their plan to trick Dreeze into punching one of the sailors so they could confront him as a group and undermine the position of the fishermen. In fact, I had been positioned in the bar to get hurt in their exchange. With an unrelated civilian injured in their scuffle, the Toritrine family would have to punish the sailors, and the Pasteli

family would punish the fishermen. The hope was that reprimanding both groups together would help relieve some of their animosity.

But the elf had been so quick, gallantly saving me from harm. I didn't really like the idea of getting hurt, so I was grateful for the help and was honestly a little happy, but...thanks to that, the Laurette Company was free to run wild.

Having failed my mission, I returned that night to the family who had employed me, where I was then ordered to keep an eye on the elf and use him to stop the situation that was now unfolding because of my failure.

I had no right to refuse the mission, even if it meant exploiting the man who had protected me.

The elf ended up resolving the situation himself, but that didn't change the fact that I had put him in harm's way. The dull, heavy pain in my chest was no doubt a feeling of guilt.

"They have a bunch of processed spices but no raw stuff, huh? Ah, maybe they only sell the processed stuff. That makes sense. They wouldn't want their customers to bring the plants back and start growing them themselves. That's unfortunate but not surprising."

The elf grabbed one of the workers at the warehouse and pelted him with a barrage of questions. I was starting to envy just how much fun he was having. I really had no idea what he was talking about. I couldn't begin to imagine how an elf saw the world. It was just so different from my own reality.

"Can I taste it? Yeah, just a tiny bit."

At least I still knew when I needed to step in and stop him. The worker was clearly troubled, so I got in between them.

"Acer, please. I know you're having fun seeing all these new things, but calm down. Can't you see you're bothering him?"

I tried to calm him down. The spice in question was no ordinary salt. This was an expensive spice shipped here from across the ocean. There was no way he'd be allowed to taste it before buying it. There was a reason people who used the spice watched over it like hawks.

This elf was really, really bad for my heart. If I took my eyes off him for an instant, who knew what disaster his whimsy would lead him into? I would have to watch him closely for as long as he was in Saurotay.

Maybe the pain in my chest wasn't *all* guilt. When I came to that realization, the weight on my heart began to lighten just a bit.

Master Damned Dwarf

The art of blacksmithing is integral to the dwarven people. Even back in the times of our ancestors, in the age of myth, dwarves were working metal into tools. It's just in our blood.

Of course, if all dwarves everywhere did nothing but blacksmithing, we'd starve. For that matter, we wouldn't even have ores to make metal with. We'd go extinct in no time. But even so, all dwarves learned the fundamentals of blacksmithing at the schoolhouse when they were young. They also learned how to use swords, spears, axes, and clubs at the same time. Boy or girl, it didn't matter.

Those who showed exceptional talent became blacksmith apprentices studying under the masters. The rest took work that helped support dwarven society in general, be it cultivation of underground potatoes, brewing alcohol, raising goats, or mining for ore. Those who excelled in combat became soldiers to protect the country or traveled over the mountains to engage in trade with the humans.

Unlike human society, we had no true lower class. Everyone understood that each person was a necessary cog in the machine. The human nobles and officials who couldn't understand that were seen as fools. Well, there were some nobles and officials who *did* understand that, and there were plenty of adventurers out there who used brute force to get their way... Either way, there were plenty of fools among the humans.

But that aside, even without a lower class in dwarven society, smiths and soldiers were still held in high regard. An exceptionally skilled blacksmith could even aim for the throne.

However, no matter how special the art of blacksmithing was to us dwarves, a country only needed so many smiths. Even those dwarves who took other jobs often practiced blacksmithing as a hobby, making things like pots and kettles for themselves. So, after training for a set amount of time under the masters, a smith recognized as being at a professional level would head to human lands to continue their training alone. At least, the men did. Women smiths were permitted to stay in dwarven lands. It wasn't like there was anything stopping them from going, but I had never heard of it happening before.

So as a man, I naturally headed to human lands. In hopes of finding more customers for my work, I set up in a town beside the Great Pulha Woodlands known as Vistcourt. That was almost thirty years ago.

I met all sorts of people in those thirty years. People I hated, people who were arrogant, people who were pleasant to be around, and people with bright, promising futures. But I also had just as many farewells. The old ladies that had done so much for me when I first moved in reached the end of their life span within ten years. Some people bought weapons from me and headed out into Pulha, never to return.

If I had to single out one experience that stood out from the rest, it would have to be that guy. He was like a storm that had come just for me.

"Master Damned Dwarf." That's what he called me. Honestly, it was a pretty rude way to talk to one's teacher, but I allowed it from him. Unfortunately, the kids in the area picked up on it and started calling me that too, but I wasn't the type to get mad at kids over something so small.

I had no issue with him calling me that because there was no sign of malice in him. It felt more like a sign of familiarity, since I also called him the damned elf. Though we were master and student, the way we addressed each other put us on equal footing and made for a fairer relationship.

He was really strange for an elf. I learned later he was a high elf, but that was the *least* odd part about him. The fact he was interested in blacksmithing at all was practically heretical for any elf. And for some reason, he had no hatred toward us dwarves. It would be one thing if he felt that way after knowing a

dwarf for some time, but he was like that from the start.

Elves and dwarves had hated each other since the time of our ancestors' ancestors, back in the age of myths. But he just swooped into my shop like he couldn't care less. And he showed that same kind of open honesty to the kids in the neighborhood too. Thinking back on it, that was probably why I accepted him as a student. Well, I also knew that it would make me the first dwarf to ever teach an elf to smith.

That damned elf had a real talent for making things. That was my conclusion after teaching him for ten years, so I was confident in my assertion. He was always bouncing between celebrating and criticizing everything he made, always looking to see what went well and what had failed. But he was also willing to grow slowly and steadily rather than be led astray by the results of a single attempt. He was surprisingly short-tempered, but he had the patience and persistence to gauge himself from a long-term perspective.

That also set him apart from other elves, I thought. It was no surprise that I started seeing him as a friend. What *was* strange was that I started to see other elves with less animosity than before too. Of course, the fact that other elves treated me with respect as the teacher of a high elf for his sake probably had something to do with it. But...I don't think that was all there was to it. I think he helped me to see the others not as elves with all the prejudices attached, but as individuals. For example, even if they were elves, seeing them get dragged around by his whimsy and unreasonable behavior made me feel sympathy for them.

In short, it seemed that I, and dwarves in general, had always looked at the elves as just a group. It was the same as how I wasn't too fond of the forest, but I had nothing against any particular tree. I imagined elves felt much the same about dwarves. Even among dwarves, I got along with some but not with others. And among the elves, there was someone like him.

Humans were the same too. There were dishonest and proud people among them. Weak and strong, fools and wise men, they came in all different kinds. But as a group, humans were greedy, terrifying creatures. Their short life spans led to lives that burned quickly and fiercely, seeking to fulfill their every desire.

I realized it was important to see people as individuals as much as we saw them as groups. Today, I was leaving the city of Vistcourt behind, heading back home to dwarven lands. I would share what I had learned in human lands with my brethren. I knew my people weren't the kind that could be convinced with mere words, so I would have to back up those beliefs with my skill in blacksmithing by taking the throne for myself.

I also had a promise to keep with my friend. We would meet again someday. That wasn't a prediction; it was a conviction. We dwarves lived fairly long, and he was a high elf, a being right out of a fairy tale who could live for who knew how long. We both had plenty of time.

Thinking about how he would live the rest of his life among humanity, I was a bit worried for him. But just like the fairy tales, this high elf had an impressive power. He would likely be fine in any situation.

So the next time we met, I'd be able to greet him with pride as his master and as his friend. Even if he was a high elf, no matter what he had accomplished in that time, we'd be calling each other "that damned elf" and "that damned dwarf" like equals.

Ahh, life would be quite busy when I made it back to the kingdom of the dwarves.

Side Story — The Creation Game

“Gah, a high elf!”

While drinking in a local bar with my friend Rodna, the city guard, I was surprised to hear someone shout that from behind me. But when I turned to look, I instead found a pair of men staring at a board game laid on the table between them.

Oh, it's just that game.

I turned back to my ale, a little relieved.

The game they were playing was one where you fought with pieces on a board. The five types of pieces used for the game were called dragons, phoenixes, spirits, giants, and high elves. The game was called *The Time of Creation*, and it was based on the mythology of this world. It could be played with either two or four players. This bar had a few copies of board games and pieces that patrons could borrow, and occasionally you could see people gambling with them.

The only board games I knew of were from my previous life, like chess and shogi, but this was a little different. Well, though chess and shogi could actually be traced back to the same origin, the idea of using pieces to fight on a game board wasn't especially unique. Humans were pretty good at finding ways to entertain themselves.

“Oh, you interested in that game, Acer?” Rodna asked, his face red from overindulging in drink. He had been drinking strangely heavily today, so while he was still speaking clearly, I doubted he could keep it up much longer.

Rodna wasn't particularly good at holding his alcohol. Maybe he was about normal in comparison to other humans, but my only point of reference was Master Damned Dwarf, so I couldn't help but see him as fairly weak to it. As a dwarf, Master Damned Dwarf preferred strong spirits, which he drank like water. He was always complaining about the flavor, but the amount he drank

and the speed at which he did were both incredible.

“Oh, no, I just heard him mention a high elf, so I was curious.”

Rodna nodded at my answer. I had never told him I was a high elf, as explaining everything seemed like too much work, but it wasn't that strange for an ordinary elf to react to those words anyway.

Actually, I did have a small interest in *The Time of Creation*, but the rules were complex enough that Rodna wouldn't be able to play in his current state. Then again, I was a total novice who knew no more than the base rules, so maybe a drunk *was* a suitable opponent for me.

The difference between this game and something like chess or shogi was that to capture a piece, you had to use a specific piece of your own. You then arranged the captured pieces like you would in hanafuda or mahjong to score points.

For example, the high elf piece could be captured by a giant, a giant by a dragon, a dragon by a phoenix, a phoenix by a spirit, and a spirit by a high elf. If you took a high elf, a giant, and a phoenix, you could make a set called “Bonds of Earth and Clouds,” which was worth a certain number of points.

There was no piece like the king in chess or shogi that would end the game if it was captured, so the game wasn't decided until after a set number of moves, usually fifty or a hundred, after which the players tallied their scores.

There was no set board size or number of pieces to be used, so high-level players could play with a board covering an entire table with enough pieces that the game would last for days. Of course, the board provided by the bar wasn't that big. But for someone inexperienced like me, it would be best to find some retired old guy to teach me the ropes with a relatively small board.

“Really? Too bad. It's pretty fun, you know. Sometimes we play when we're stuck at headquarters. You should learn it, Acer. We'll play next time.”

I waved off Rodna's suggestion. Any hobby that guards used to kill time would eventually become something they were excellent at. Guarding the gates or going on patrol was important work, but it was equally important to keep

someone on standby in case of an emergency. They also had wooden decks of cards, some strange dice games, and something similar to hanafuda.

Well, I'd learn little by little. Airena would probably help me practice, and I'd be able to play with Rodna and Master Damned Dwarf on my days off.

There were plenty of fun things left for me to experience in this world.

Afterword

Hello, this is Rarutori. At first, I wrote my name to be read as “Raruchou,” but when I contacted my editor I accidentally introduced myself as “Rarutori,” so it ended up sticking. I guess you’d normally read that character as “tori,” wouldn’t you?

Thank you very much for reading *Enough With This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I’m Bored*. That’s kind of a long title, isn’t it?

I originally made this novel for the Shosetsuka ni Naro competition, so it’s pretty awesome that it got published. I never thought I’d actually end up publishing a book. I mean, I guess I was aiming for that since I joined the competition and everything, but it still didn’t feel like it would ever happen. Having a dream come true so suddenly was both exciting and terrifying.

My favorite part about my work being published into a novel is probably the art that gets added to it. Normally, a character’s personality drives their actions and speech, but in the end, they’re all just words. Having illustrations really expands the world of the novel in an incredible way. Acer is pretty cool and handsome, isn’t he? I can’t overstate how very, very, very thankful I am to Ciavis for his illustrations.

So in this novel, Acer is a high elf, but he has his memories from a past life of being a human. That makes him an ill fit for the high elf way of life, or you could say it leads to him becoming bored of that lifestyle, so he leaves his home in the forest behind. But he already spent more than a hundred years living among people with a far different value system than humans have, so there’s no way he’d go back to being human. That leads him to being called a “damned elf,” a name he wears with pride.

Acer is pretty optimistic, but he’s also got a masochistic streak. He acts without hesitation but is also fearful of stepping into things. Basically, he’s an immature high elf that thinks of himself as a mature human. I’d be happy if you

would see this half-baked, damned elf's journey through to the end. Well, I call it a journey, but he takes pretty long stops along the way. In the five chapters included in this book, almost twenty years pass.

Apparently I can still write quite a bit for this afterword, but what should I talk about? Can I just talk about myself?

My hobby is going out to enjoy good food and drink. I especially like vegetable tempura and sake during the spring. While I'm writing this I'm currently not able to travel much, but I'm dying to go out drinking. I was really good at not going out last year, so please let me go this year.

I also made a promise to a friend who supported me all along the way that we'd go out for some great food once my dream came true, so we'll probably have basashi or something. It looks like they have a big job coming too, so we'll be able to celebrate together...once we're able to actually go out, of course.

As for my other hobbies, as ordinary as they are, I'd say games and manga.

When this book comes out, I might be playing Monster Hunter. I don't have a Nintendo Switch yet, but I'm thinking of getting one. I'm a pretty casual gamer; I start to panic when things get tough. Acting with speed and precision like Acer does when hunting is quite difficult for me. Of course, my favorite weapon type is the bow, but I also use the hunting horn from time to time.

As for manga, recently I've enjoyed one that involves girls going fishing. I like eating fish, but I don't have much interest in dealing with them live, so I've only been fishing when I was young. If Acer ever ends up going fishing himself, you can probably guess where that idea came from.

Also, though it's not really a hobby of mine, after writing this book I've grown pretty curious about blacksmithing, so I'd really like to go observe a blacksmith at work one day. Apparently there's a place where you can go watch, and the visitors can even make something like a paper knife for themselves.

Looks like I can keep going for a bit. Okay, can I talk about Japanese sake for a bit then?

I imagine there are probably quite a few people who aren't fond of it, like people who tried ordering it at a bar or had a friend recommend it to them, but it just wasn't for them. Well, the kind of sake that drinkers like is often something that only those who are already fond of it appreciate, so it might be a bit of a niche taste.

So next time you're out drinking, why not try Roze No Yukidoke? It sounds like a kind of wine, doesn't it? Actually, the taste is pretty similar too. I personally think it tastes really good and is pretty easy to drink, so try it out sometime if you're interested. Of course, only if you're old enough to drink.

I don't see it too often in stores, so you'll probably have to order it yourself.

If we make it to volume two, we'll probably talk about another kind of sake then. Alternatively, if you know any good sake, please let me know!



Afterword

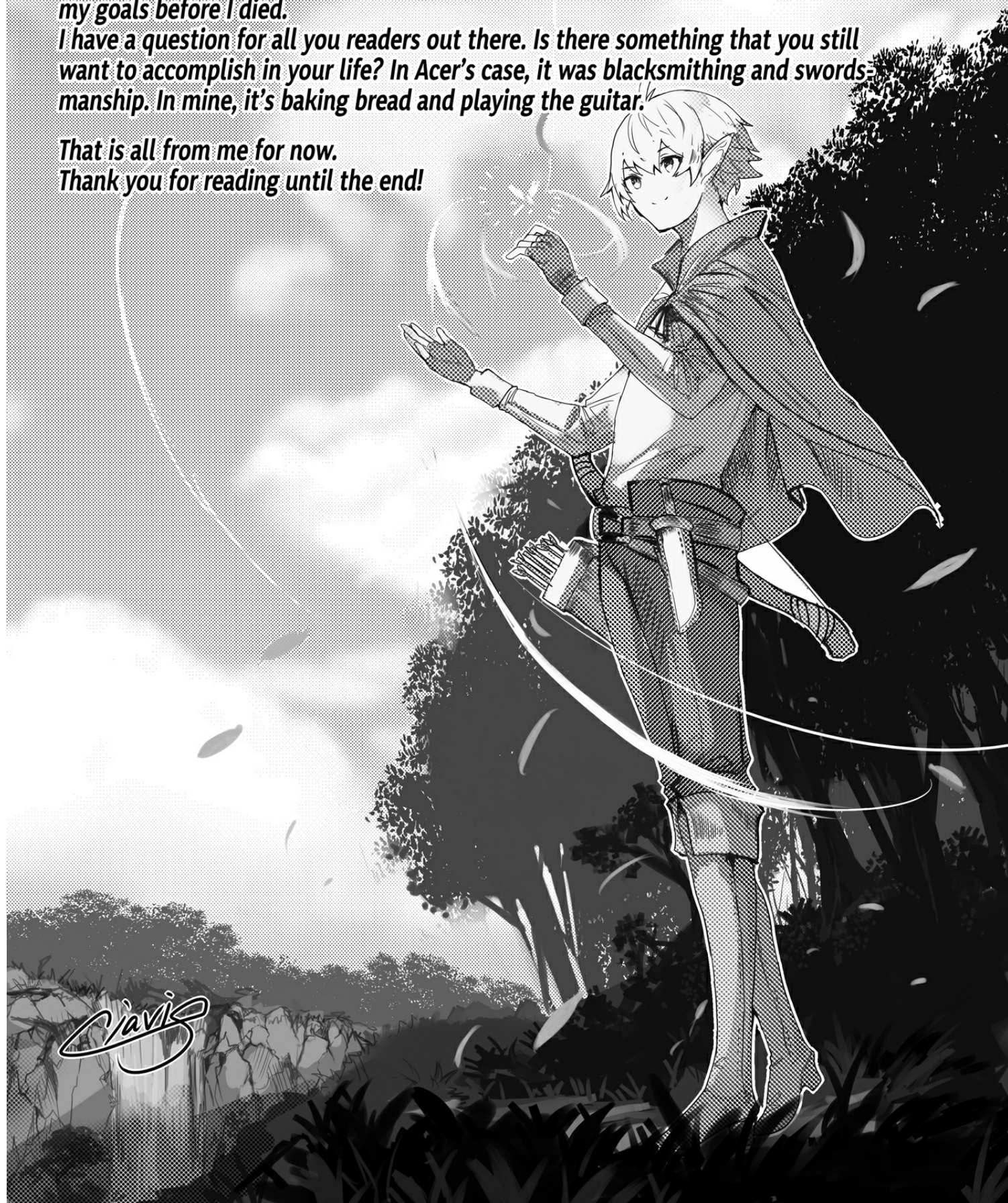
***Congratulations on the release of the novel edition of “Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I’m Bored!”
My name is Ciavis, and I am the illustrator for this series.***

Reading this book really made me more determined to pursue my goals before I died.

I have a question for all you readers out there. Is there something that you still want to accomplish in your life? In Acer’s case, it was blacksmithing and swordsmanship. In mine, it’s baking bread and playing the guitar.

That is all from me for now.

Thank you for reading until the end!







"WH-WH-WHAT
ARE YOU DOING
MANNING A SHOP
FOR A DWARF
LORD ACER?!"

"He said if I
worked for him,
he'd teach me.
And he's
paying me too,
so why not?"

GOOD
GRIEF...

AIRENA

ACER

OSWALD

Practicing swordsmanship was rather mundane, as I had expected. However, with my master Kaeha practicing the same movements beside me, just watching her was quite interesting. She silently stood at my side, swinging her sword over and over.

KAEHA

KAEHA'S MOTHER



Bonus Short Story

Not Quite Fishing

The sound of seagulls squawking filled the air. I kept my breathing steady as I watched closely. I was tracking the movements of fish in the water, with help from aquatic spirits. There were plenty of fish swimming in the ocean, but I narrowed my search down to where I could get a clear grasp on how each was moving.

...Now.

A single fish came bouncing up to the surface. Though I knew how it was moving, I couldn't actually see it yet, so I didn't know what kind of fish it was. I nocked an arrow and drew it back. The fish burst from the surface of the water, jumping into the air, and was immediately pierced by my arrow.

Heedless of my appearance, I leapt forward and ran across the water to retrieve my arrow and prize before the seagulls could get to it. Lifting up the fish, I strolled back to shore where the other fishermen waited.

"See? It's easy."

The fish I had caught was about forty centimeters long... Maybe it was a mullet? It was the kind that had a powerful smell, so it needed to be processed quickly to avoid spoiling. Then again, the water in this world was pretty clean, so maybe it would be okay. Either way, getting it cleaned up quickly was probably the safest bet.

But as I proudly showed off my catch, the leader of the young fishermen, Dreeze, shook his head. "Nothing easy about that. That was incredible. Nevermind the stuff about the bow, humans like us can't run on water, you know?" he said with a sigh of exasperation.

This had all started because Dreeze had invited me to go fishing with him

while we were eating at Grand's bar.

"Let's go get something big. I'm sure it'll be easy for you. You'll love it," he had invited me out happily. Dreeze was a professional fisherman, so he was quite accustomed to it, and could probably work a net to catch fish quite quickly. He had probably invited me out because he thought I'd enjoy it.

But I had been just a little bit drunk.

"There's no way it'll be easy. Fishing needs a complicated setup, and if you mess up the timing you just lose your bait, right? And even when it's on the line, it can just swim circles around you. I've never tried it before, but it'd probably be easier to just use my bow."

So I had argued with him. Yeah, thinking back, I was definitely in the wrong.

...was I actually a mean drunk?

But Dreeze just said, "What are you talking about? There's no way you can catch fish with a bow. You sure you're thinking straight?"

So I had immediately snapped back.

"Then I'll just show you!"

"Hah, try it!"

Well it went something like that. One of the great things about Dreeze was that if you acted bullish, he'd respond in kind. He never faltered, so I didn't have to watch my words around him.

Anyway, I showed him pretty clearly, but it seemed like he wasn't happy about it. I guess he was right. Walking on water would be pretty tough for humans. I doubted I could do it without the water spirits' help. I guess tracking the fish would be tough too. Once you were used to it, you could predict their movements, but there was so much life in the ocean that tracking fish individually would be a challenge. It took some training to get good at it, but I imagined fishing was the same way.

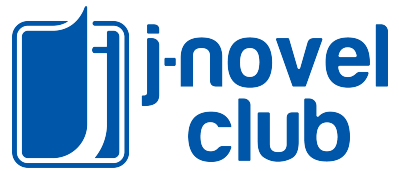
"Oh, really? Sorry, Dreeze. Then I guess let's try normal fishing. Since we've got the chance, you can teach me."

Now that I thought about it, having to run out onto the water to pick up your catch was kind of a pain. I was starting to think that fishing properly would be more convenient. Yeah, maybe I was wrong. Handing the mullet-like fish to Dreeze, I asked him to teach me.

“Leave it to me. You’re really an interesting guy, Mr. Elf.”

A bit confused by his sudden laughter, I nevertheless nodded. I didn’t know what he meant, but it was a lot better than being called boring.

So, what would we be eating tonight? That would all be decided by today’s catch.



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Enough with This Slow Life! I Was Reincarnated as a High Elf and Now I'm Bored: Volume 1

by rarutori

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Ebook edition 1.0: February 2023

Premium E-Book